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STORM ISLAND

KEN
FOLLETT
THE
BEAR RAID

THE BEAR RAID

'We've been asking who is behind the leak. Suppose we broaden the field of enquiry. Who was behind the merger? Who was behind the strike?'

'If you're driving at something, I'm missing the point,' Piers said.

'Listen, Piers. What if the three questions have the same answer?'

Piers stared at Palmer. 'It would be a bear raid. Good Lord!' There was a silence while both men rolled out the implications in their minds . . .

Also by the same author:

The Shakeout

The Bear Raid

Ken Follett



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The low sun glowed dully red, filtered through the haze of a great city's dirty air. It turned the soft underbelly of the cloud layer greyish-pink, and picked out the factory buildings in black silhouette, investing their functional shapes with temporary dignity. Streams of people flowed around and out of the buildings, slowing down as they joined the main river headed for the gates.

Looking from the fourth floor window, Piers Roper could believe he was at the head of a great manufacturing concern. A Captain of Industry, the newspaper had called him; printing his picture and a string of clichés concocted by his Publicity Office. But he saw the journalist's point: a captain need not own his ship, but he was its master. If any one person was responsible for the dust haze, it was Piers.

Not that he was concerned about pollution. He reckoned he would be dead before it got serious.

He looked at his watch: Porter was late. Anton Porter, whose life was measured in fractions – a few thou off the gauge of a door panel, a tenth of a penny from the cost of a spring clip – could not time the walk from the research and development block to the management building with an accuracy better than ten minutes either way.

Piers' gaze drifted over to the new car lot. It was always fuller on Friday, a day few lorry drivers were willing to

begin a long journey. The multicoloured rows of cars, packed nose to tail, looked like an abstract mosaic. Piers had had the extra window put in the Managing Director's office so that he could see the lot. Watching the finished cars being driven out of the test bays and loaded on transporters kept him in touch with reality: it put steel flesh on the paper bones of the charts, reports and printouts which flowed across his desk.

His secretary put her silver-grey head around the door – Piers had dispensed with intercoms, in order to encourage people to think twice before bothering him – and said: 'Mr. Porter is here, Mr. Roper.' She stepped aside to admit the tall, stooping figure of the Head of Research and Development.

Piers said: 'Sit down, Anton.'

The secretary looked at her watch. 'Is there anything else?'

'Pour some drinks before you go, Audrey.' Piers looked an inquiry at Porter.

'A gin and tonic for me.' Porter tossed a sheaf of files on to Piers' desk. 'Wind tunnel tests on the K19. It works. Also on the Diplomat coupé with a spoiler. That doesn't. Progress report on the new plastic for hot water hoses. Thanks.' He took the glass Audrey offered.

Piers tasted his whisky, found it had exactly the right amount of water, and nodded at his secretary. 'Good night, Audrey.'

'Good night, Mr. Roper. Mr. Porter.'

'What's wrong with the spoiler on the coupé?' Piers asked.

'Design can't come up with something that works, and we can't find a shape which is visually acceptable,' Porter said. He took a pipe from his jacket pocket and fumbled for matches. 'I can't see that the appearance of the thing matters. Anyone who'd buy it is worried about performance, not looks.'

Piers pushed the table lighter across the desk. 'You're wrong. Think: who buys a coupé version of an up-market family saloon?'

'A man who wants a big, fast car.'

'It's a little more complex than that. The man's a schizo-

phrenic. He can't make up his mind about his self-image: whether to be a dashing playboy or ah . . . a Captain of Industry.'

Porter smiled around his pipe, showing tobacco-stained teeth under the bushy, sand-coloured moustache. He had read the newspaper article.

Piers went on: 'He ends up with the worst of both worlds, of course. The coupé is slower than a sports car and less comfortable and spacious than a saloon. However, the point is that he won't buy anything that looks like a sports car.'

Porter shrugged, 'You put 'em up, I'll knock 'em down.'

Piers picked up the reports. 'I'll go through these before the Monday meeting.'

Porter's eyes glittered under the overhanging brows as he glanced quickly at Piers. 'Not taking them home, are you?'

A humourless, thin-lipped smile crossed Piers's face briefly. 'My safe is stout, but not quite secure enough for the secrets of Greatlake Motors (UK) Ltd.'

'Ah.'

Piers took a packet of Senior Service from his desk drawer, slid it open, and extracted a cigarette, tapping the tube of tobacco against the pack in a habitual gesture.

'Talking of secrets . . . ' Porter began.

Piers lit his cigarette, leaving Porter to fumble.

'Talking of secrets, we're getting a very good flow of information from the opposition these days.'

'From English Motors?' Piers asked.

'Is there anyone else that counts?'

'So we should. No doubt they're getting a good flow of information from us. It's part of the game.'

'I fervently hope the information they're getting from us isn't this good.' Porter shifted uneasily in the chair, as if he felt he was talking about something slightly improper.

Piers blew smoke and looked expressionlessly at the other man.

Porter plunged on. 'There are some things we've always received: sales figures, financial information, occasionally a photograph of a prototype - things that became public soon after we learned of them. And modifications - nobody can keep them secret once the work sheets for the retooling have

been given out. But the stuff we're getting now is straight out of their laboratories.'

'Good.'

'Of course, I won't embarrass you by talking about how we get the information -'

'Dear God, no.'

'Not that I'm at all sure myself. I only know the next link in the chain.'

'Which is how it should be. I think I've heard enough.'

'I thought you should know -'

'Sure.'

Porter looked quizzically at Piers. 'You were in Intelligence, weren't you?'

'In the Army. Nothing glamorous - devising and breaking codes. I did mathematics at Cambridge.'

'Ah. Oxford man, myself. Any sport?'

Piers got up and went to the cocktail cabinet. 'High jump. Another drink?'

'No thanks.' Porter looked at the Managing Director's tall, lean frame. 'Athletics, yes. Too light for rugger. I rowed. Well ...' He got up.

Piers carried a fresh drink to his desk and sat down. 'Sorry to have kept you late, Anton.'

'No trouble. My own fault for nattering. Have a good weekend.'

'Good night.'

When the door shut Piers leaned back in his chair and lit another cigarette. It had been an interesting conversation; Porter had wanted to draw him out. Piers was not in the habit of being drawn by his executives. No doubt they thought him cold, reserved. But he was seen as a sharp operator, too; especially by the younger executives. He had to be: had he not manoeuvred himself into the top job only a few months after joining the company?

Still, Anton Porter had got what he wanted from the conversation. He had enough information to label Piers: Cambridge rather than Oxford, athletics rather than rugby, Army rather than Navy. He had already known that Piers was his junior by ten years. It was enough to identify Piers as a Young Turk.

And Porter seemed to suspect that Piers was responsible for the useful leakage of secrets from English Motors. Piers smiled; broadly this time, showing his teeth; a carnivorous smile which set his angular features in a new cast; a smile he allowed himself when he was alone.

There was an irony.

He began to read the reports.

It was dark when he finished them. The place was quiet: as near to silence as the city ever got. There was the background hum of traffic far away, the crisp steps of a patrolling security guard outside, the distant thunder of a railway train.

He put out his cigarette and emptied his glass.

He left his office, went through Audrey's office, and walked down the corridor to the swing doors beside the staircase. One door of the pair was bolted. He opened the other, reached up, and unhooked the spring mechanism which closed it. Then he gently pushed the doors to. Now, if anyone came through the door, Piers would hear the clatter as it hit the wall.

He returned to his office, picked up Porter's reports, and took them into Audrey's office. He switched on the photocopier in the corner and memorised the digits on the counter. Then he carefully photocopied the reports, checking each page as it emerged from the machine.

When the job was done he switched off and took the copies and the originals back into his office. He slipped the copies into a folder and put it in his briefcase; then went over to the wall safe, opened it, and put the originals inside. He closed the safe door and spun the dial.

Finally he took a nail file from his desk drawer, went into Audrey's office, and unscrewed the plate on the front of the copying machine, taking care not to scratch the shiny surface. He used the nail file to turn the numbers on the counter back to the figure he had memorised, then screwed the plate back on.

On the opposite side of his office was a door leading to a bathroom. Piers went in and washed his face, to take away

the traces of sweat which had appeared above his eyebrows and under his nose.

Patting his face with a towel, he went to his bookcase. He picked out the bound score of Handel's Messiah. He returned the towel to the bathroom and sat down at his desk with the book.

He turned the pages idly, hearing the music in his head as he saw it in manuscript. It was marvellous music: more simple and popular than Piers' usual taste, but such a fine marriage of libretto and melody. It seemed a shame to part with the book, but he could get another.

He came to *I Know That My Redeemer Liveth*, and flattened the book on the desk. Palmer was unmusical, but even he could not fail to recognise that tune.

Piers unscrewed the cap of his fountain pen and delicately dropped a blot of ink on the second stanza.

He took a theatre ticket from his wallet and placed it on the page, close to the binding, then shut the book. He put it in an envelope, closed the seal, and hefted the package in his hand, guessing its weight. He estimated what it would cost to post, and stuck on several stamps. He put it in his briefcase.

He heard the clatter of the swing doors as he was putting on his black, single-breasted overcoat. He fixed his bowler hat on his head and went out, turning off the lights.

In the corridor the security guard was re-connecting the spring mechanism. The man had put down his torch and his key-clock in order to fumble with the catch. He stood aside and held the door for Piers.

'The spring is off the hook,' the guard explained. 'They undo it to get the post trolley through the doors, then half the time they never bother to fix it again.'

Piers nodded uninterestedly. 'Good night.'

'Good night, Mr. Roper.'

As he descended the stairs Piers reflected that his trick with the door had not been needed. Still, precautions were never wasted.

All important meetings were clandestine these days, Piers

reflected. If a conference was allowed to become public knowledge, it was certain to be a pantomime. The real business was always conducted at clubs, on golf courses, or in the back seats of chauffeured Rolls-Royces. It was part of the change industry was going through as it became more entangled with politics – a change he and his kind had helped to bring about.

Still, this was the first time he had met an Under-Secretary in a hamburger bar.

The immaculate cut of Austin Ratcliffe's suit distinguished him among the early lunchers in the Haymarket. Piers spotted him and crossed the restaurant to his table.

'Roper. How do you do. Sit down.'

'How are you Ratcliffe?' Piers eased himself into the narrow gap between the table and the seat, and looked around him.

'Sorry to bring you to this place,' Ratcliffe said. 'I must confess it was not just discretion which motivated me.' He patted his bulging stomach. 'I'm supposed to be dieting, and my secretary is in league with my wife to keep me to the regime. They think I'm at the sauna.'

'You should take up some energetic sport – squash, perhaps,' Piers looked at the menu.

'No time. I'm having a half-pound hamburger, *frites* and salad, and a chocolate milk shake. I've ordered the same for you.'

Piers suppressed a shudder. 'Fine.'

'They make the hamburgers like the Americans. Not quite as good, of course.'

'But just as bad for the middle-aged heart.'

'My dear chap, you sound like my wife.'

'It comes of being a bachelor. I have to nag myself.'

Ratcliffe laughed, his double chin wobbling. 'Have you ever eaten a real hamburger, in New York?'

'No.'

'You must, next time you go.'

'I expect it will be soon. I must talk to my American masters before too long, and I doubt if the mountain will come to Mohammed. Ah. Your calories are here.'

A waiter in a grubby white jacket unceremoniously

dumped two piled plates in front of them. He added two tall glasses of a brown liquid, then brought a revolving tray of sauces from an adjoining table.

Ratcliffe lifted the lid of his hamburger and generously spooned on tomato ketchup. 'Is it about your American masters that you want to speak?'

'I suppose so. Although everything that happens at Greatlake Motors (UK) concerns Greatlake Motors (USA).' Piers removed the bread roll from his hamburger with his knife and fork, and sampled the meat. It tasted as if it had been grilled over charcoal. 'You know we have a motorcycle division.'

'Of course. I had a Holmes bike when I was seventeen.' Ratcliffe grinned widely, and Piers thought: 'That's what he is - boyish. The civil servant went on: 'I was glad you decided not to rename the cycles when you went in with the Americans. A Holmes machine still has a lot of glamour. I bought a Holmes Thousand, back in - never mind.'

I have nothing in common with this man, Piers thought. He loathed motorcycles. Aloud he said: 'The factory is in the North, at Creighton.'

Ratcliffe nodded and swallowed. 'In a Development Area. You've had a lot of money out of the Government for that factory.'

'I'm sure. However, it was before my time. My concern is that the enterprise has been losing money for ten years.'

'Substantially?'

Piers tasted his salad. The lettuce was limp and the tomato soft. He gave up, and laid his cutlery on his plate. 'My American masters and I have independently concluded that the loss cannot go on.'

Ratcliffe's face took on the sorrowful look of a bank manager about to refuse an overdraft. 'I'm afraid I can't offer any financial help. Apart from the fact that there's no money in my Minister's kitty, we simply couldn't be seen to give you preferential treatment. The Opposition would ask why we were subsidising American profits, and perhaps they would be right.'

It was the reaction Piers had expected. Without asking for money, he had put Ratcliffe into the position of one who

refuses to make a loan. Now the Under-Secretary would be psychologically disposed to react favourably to anything else Piers suggested, to compensate for his negativity.

Piers said: 'Quite so. Our plans for closing the operation down are fully developed. It is they that I really want to talk over.'

Ratcliffe stopped chewing.

Piers sipped his milk shake, found it almost solid ice cream, and pushed it aside.

Ratcliffe said slowly: 'The psychological effect of closing the Holmes motorcycle plant - in an election year . . .'

'I put that point to Detroit,' Piers said untruthfully. 'They asked why they should subsidise a British party's election campaign, and perhaps they were right.' He tried to catch the waiter's eye, but the man avoided him studiously.

'Holmes Motorcycles is a byword all over the world,' Ratcliffe went on. 'The unemployment . . . The Japanese would jump into the market, of course . . . more imports . . . the balance of payments . . .'

Piers grabbed the arm of the waiter as he passed the table. 'Two cups of coffee and the bill,' he said. He turned back to Ratcliffe. 'But as you say, you can't be seen to contribute to American profits out of British taxpayers' money.'

'It would be most difficult,' Ratcliffe said worriedly. 'My Minister is not going to like this.' He had abandoned his lunch.

Piers lit a cigarette and inhaled. The sweet after-taste of ice cream was still in his mouth, and the smoke tasted unpleasant. He needed Ratcliffe to throw him one more cue.

Ratcliffe said: 'An organisation the size of Greatlake - surely some other use can be found for a fully equipped factory?'

'No,' said Piers. 'The plant is tooled for cycles. We can't use it to make cars.' He frowned. 'Unless . . .'

Ratcliffe was staring at him with total concentration, his face blank. Piers hoped the man could not see how contrived the conversation had been.

'Can I speak completely without commitment?' he said.

'Of course.'

'We've done a great deal of research into invalid car-

riages,' Piers began. 'We've come up with a satisfactory design, based on one of our small cars. The costings are attractive – we can turn them out for little more than those three-wheelers, which, as you know, are inconvenient and downright dangerous. We are on the point of abandoning the project, because the demand is too small, and will continue to be until the Government stops supplying the three-wheelers.

'My point is that, with some encouragement from you, we could convert the motorcycle factory into a production line for our invalid cars. This is all most tentative, of course, and I certainly cannot give any guarantees –'

'Naturally,' Ratcliffe said solicitously, and Piers realised the man had no idea that this was what he had been leading up to for the past hour.

He added: 'My Board may well say that we must have firm orders from the Government before we can commit ourselves to the investment –'

Radcliffe reached across the table to touch Piers's forearm. He looked conspiratorial. 'Don't put it to your board, yet, Piers. Let me talk to my Minister first. I should find out how far I can go to help you, then let you present your masters with a package.'

Piers looked doubtful. 'I would have to call a halt – a hiatus – in our closedown plans immediately. I need to be sure of your strong interest in the alternative project.'

'Be assured – my interest is strong,' Radcliffe stood up. 'The coffee isn't going to come, I think.' He took out his wallet.

'Let me,' Piers said.

'Oh, thank you. You know – I think I'll put the idea to the Minister the way you put it to me.'

Piers gave a puzzled half-smile, as if he knew a joke had been made but he was not quite sure why it was funny. He put a five-pound note on the table before looking at Ratcliffe. Then he saw that there was no guile in the man's eyes. His deception was safe.

The two men left the café and shook hands outside before walking away in opposite directions. The waiter watched

them through the window and wondered what he had done to deserve a £2 tip.

Piers fidgeted in his theatre seat. After sending his ticket to Palmer, he had discovered that the Messiah performance was almost sold out, and he had been forced to buy a seat in the Gods. Up there, the acoustics were hopeless. Piers's tolerance for imperfection was zero. His irritation with the sound spoiled any pleasure he might have got out of the music.

And in the five-guinea seat he had given away was Palmer, who would be no more moved than if he had been listening to himself singing in the bath.

At last the contralto started to sing the aria which was Piers's cue. He got up from his seat at the edge of the row and walked down the aisle and out of the auditorium. The music was choked off abruptly by the closing door.

Piers descended the carpeted stairs and found the Gents on the mezzanine. Palmer was already there, washing his hands. There was no attendant, and the small room appeared empty. Piers ran his eye quickly along the row of WC cubicles. All the doors registered 'Vacant'.

Following his glance, Palmer said: 'All clear. I've looked.' He dried his hands on a towel.

Piers smiled. 'Are you well?' He handed over an envelope of photostats.

'I'm fine.' Palmer stuffed the envelope inside his jacket and began to wash his hands again. 'Is this stuff something special?'

'No.' Piers joined in the hand-washing camouflage, in case someone should come in. He looked at Palmer in the mirror: he had powerful shoulders, a big, bald head, and steel-rimmed spectacles. The man looked like a boxer turned chartered accountant. Piers wondered briefly what his past contained. 'Just some routine findings from R&D,' he added.

'So what have you got to say that couldn't come through the normal channels?'

Piers pointed a wet finger at Palmer's breast pocket. 'There you have photocopies of the latest results from Greatlake's laboratories, to give to your contact at English

Motors. You get them because you pay a great deal of money to a professional – me.'

Palmer dried his hands again. 'What's your point?' he said impatiently.

'For the past few months Greatlake has been getting equally good information from English.'

'My God. How?'

'I don't know. As Managing Director, I have to maintain a posture of not wishing to know about our espionage operation. Besides, Greatlake – just like English – pays the money and takes the information without asking too many questions.' Piers lit a cigarette.

Palmer nodded. 'Fair enough. We must find the leak at English, and plug it.'

'Yes. Or better, foul the water supply.'

'Quite. I'll let English know when I pass on these photostats.'

'Let's go softly for a while, Henry,' Piers said. 'Tell English, by all means – but ask them to leave it to me to find out how the information is getting through. If we play all our cards at once, the fox may go to ground.'

'To mix a metaphor,' Palmer smiled, a little ruefully. 'You're thinking faster than I am these days, Piers. That is exactly what we should do, of course.'

Piers dropped his cigarette in the ashtray above the hand basin. 'Very well, then. I'll set a trap.'

Piers left the theatre immediately after parting company with Palmer. He had already been out of his seat too long for a simple call to the toilet, and it would look more natural for him to go away. It was not that he thought he was being watched; but he always acted as if he might be, out of force of professional habit.

In the taxi he thought about Palmer. He liked the man: liked his spare, precise conversation; his intelligent cynicism; his mastery of the business of industrial espionage. Palmer was one of the few people in the world with whom Piers had a lot in common. But one of their common traits was an instinct for manipulating people, and when they had met,

they had decided to use each other. And that had precluded friendship.

Piers reached for the grab handle as the taxi swerved sharply around the island in front of Buckingham Palace. There was a small army in the forecourt: real soldiers in khaki, not tourist attractions in bearskins. A bomb scare, perhaps, Piers thought.

Palmer was one of the few people he valued for themselves, rather than for what they could do for him. Piers wondered whether they might be friends, when the time came for Palmer to quit the intelligence business. Tonight was not the first time the man had hinted at a degree of weariness.

It was astonishing how little Piers knew of his master's background. Was Palmer married? Where did he live? Was he a womaniser? A poet? A philatelist?

Piers could have found out, quite easily. Palmer's front was a legitimate company, Commercial Intelligence Services, which took on genuine market research and industrial intelligence commissions. To that extent he was a public figure. But Piers had no doubt that his private life was surrounded by trip-wires which would let him know if anyone started investigating him. Piers had similar arrangements.

The cab turned into Belgravia and pulled up outside an elegant, four-storey block of flats. Piers paid off the driver and went in. What would Palmer do when he retired, Piers wondered. The thought led logically to the question of what Piers would do when he retired. It was an uncomfortable reflection, and he dismissed it. He had more than twenty years to go.

At his front door on the first floor he paused with his key half-way to the Yale lock. On leaving he had wedged a matchstick in the door jamb and broken off the end. Now the fragment of wood lay on the polished blocks of the floor.

He opened the door silently, stepped in, and closed it. He stood listening for a moment. The flat was quiet.

The hall divided the apartment longways. On his left were the bedrooms; the kitchen was at the far end; and the dining room and drawing room were on his right.

A pair of beautifully decorated Indian clubs hung on the

wall beside the door to the little cloakroom. They were too fine to use for exercise, but it was no accident that they were kept near the front door. Piers gently lifted one down and hefted it in his hand.

His leather shoes made no noise on the carpet as he walked down the hall to the kitchen. He opened the kitchen door with painful delicacy: it sometimes squeaked. This time it did not.

The kitchen was empty.

The communicating door to the dining room was open. The room was empty.

Piers walked around the mahogany table, running his eye along the wall. His most valuable paintings were here, and none was missing. Another communicating door took him into the drawing room.

Nothing.

He slipped off his coat and dropped it on the sofa. Then he picked up the club and crept out to the hall.

He checked the cloakroom and the guest bedroom. Nothing was amiss in either. It figured. The safe was in the main bedroom.

Now that he knew where they were, it was time to abandon caution. He threw the door open and stepped in quickly.

That, too, was empty.

The safe had not been touched and there was nobody in the *en suite* bathroom.

Piers tried to remember how firmly the matchstick had been wedged.

There was only one door left. The dressing room off the bedroom had been converted into a miniature gymnasium when Piers had moved in. He crossed the room quickly, turned the handle, and kicked the door open.

The naked girl stood on a rubber mat in the middle of the floor, a pair of small weights in her hands, frowning with concentration as she lifted them above her head alternately. She looked at Piers, and her eyes widened in mock fear as she saw the club in his hand.

She said: 'Piers, what on *earth* are you thinking of doing with that great thing?'

Two

The drive from London back to the Midlands often depressed Piers. The M1 was not Britain's most successful piece of roadscaping; but his reaction went deeper than that. He liked London: it meant architecture, music, art. He felt he was leaving civilisation behind at Watford Gap. In his more candid moments, he admitted it was snobbery. But he had never been able to see what was wrong with snobbery, unless you were on the receiving end; and Piers never was.

He eased the Bentley into the slow lane, ready for his turn-off. Am I a snob? he thought, then: Am I entitled to be? People thought he had a large private income, because his father had been rich; and he maintained the fiction as a convenient explanation of the vast sums of money Palmer paid him. But was wealth the criterion any more?

A snob dislikes working-class people simply because they are working-class, he thought: yes, that would do for a definition. So what about Monica? She talked, and dressed, and walked like a debutante, but Piers knew it was phoney; for sometimes, when they were making love, she shouted obscene words in an accent which owed more to Rotherhithe than Roedean. Yet he liked her, and therefore –

No, that wasn't good enough. Do I like her, he thought, or do I just fuck her? He raised his eyebrows at the blank road in front, and hoped her vocabulary wasn't infectious.

I enjoy her, he decided. It was the right word, but it evaded the question. And the question itself was evasive, for the real problem was not whether he liked her but what he was going to do about her.

He had thought it was impossible to have an affair with a call-girl. That was why the women in his bed were always professionals. A phone call, a bundle of ten-pound notes; and the girl was always beautiful, and intelligent, and expert.

He negotiated the roundabout at the end of the turn-off, and entered a single-carriageway road. He had to make a conscious effort to keep the car's speed down. A phone call and a bundle of notes: that was how most of life's pleasures were to be acquired. Only once had there been another kind of woman in Piers's life, and Anne had –

He dismissed that thought quickly. Monica: what was to be done? She had come to his flat after a phone call, as usual. Later she had come uninvited, and he let her stay, because she was full of impish fun, and made few demands on him, and found total fulfilment in sex. But then she had started to refuse the money, and now she had a key. She said she had discovered that one of her own keys fitted the lock: but Piers suspected she had contrived to duplicate his key, somehow.

He did not want a mistress, and if he had, he would not have chosen Monica.

The grimy buildings of the Greatlake factory came into view, and Piers turned his attention to the day in front of him – or what was left of it. It was almost lunchtime, and he had to eat in the executive canteen with three new employees, hired since the coup which had put Piers in the Managing Director's chair. They would be expecting some kind of speech.

In the afternoon wheels would have to be set in motion on the invalid carriage project. Piers was keen on that. It would be a useful achievement for Greatlake, it would do no harm to his real masters at English, and it would be good publicity.

And then there was his trap. But that would be easy.

Piers studied the three new executives around the plastic wood-grain table. They seemed very young, and fresh-faced, and keen; like newly graduated college boys. It was an illusion, of course. By comparison with Piers they were young: but none of them was under thirty-five, and they were all very bright.

Kendell looked the youngest. The new Head of Public Relations, he had long hair, and tinted spectacles, and talked very fast. Greatlake had snatched him from the No. 2 job in publicity at a petrochemical giant's UK subsidiary. Years ago, he had learned his trade in the hard school of the pop music business; later he had discovered he had administrative ability too. He was cheerful and confident, and Piers wondered whether he knew there was no ladder from public relations to general management.

Opposite Piers at the small table was Gorse. Piers had approved all three appointments, but he had taken a special interest in Gorse, for he was Senior Marketing Executive, the job Piers had originally been recruited to. Gorse had been one of the first Graduate Trainees taken on by Greatlake in the days when it was called Holmes. He had risen fast in the company for ten years, then shown his independence by taking a top job with a rival firm. The move had been only a gesture, for he had returned with alacrity; but it was a gesture Piers approved of. It showed an understanding of the psychology of large companies.

But the most promising of the three, sitting on Piers's right, was Clayton. With very short blond hair and a plain, dark suit, he looked less than dynamic. Behind him he had a degree from the LSE, a commission in the RAF, accountancy qualifications and a brilliant career in the City. Lord Shipley, Greatlake's chairman, had picked him out for the post – a very senior one for such a young man – of Financial Director. At present, Piers guessed, he was underestimating how much he had to learn; but he would make up for that by learning very fast.

When the waitress came, Piers declined soup and ordered a whisky. Kendell and Gorse tactfully decided they too would do without soup; but Clayton ordered it, and when it came, drank it slowly and with no apparent unease. He's

the only one in step, Piers thought: the arrogant young bastard, I think I'm going to like him.

Hiring young executives and paying them big salaries was a policy firmly suggested by the American parent company, but Piers approved it anyway. You could be certain that young men would make more mistakes, and more strokes of genius. The Holmes tradition of promoting within the organisation was safe, but deadening. Already, Piers was sure, there were murmurings within the company about whizz-kids who knew nothing about motor cars. But there was a crisis in the motor industry, and the people who played safe would gradually, but inevitably slide into oblivion. Piers thought it was time to go for broke.

He became aware that the other three had been carrying the conversation, and had dried up. It was time he took the floor.

'You three have just moved from upper middle management to senior management,' he began. It was not quite true in Kendell's case, but it would do for a pep talk. Piers continued: 'I wonder whether you realise what a big difference there will be in your objectives from now on.'

He paused for a reaction, and got none. They were playing safe. Finally Clayton put down his soup spoon and said: 'Don't follow you.'

'You've seen the *Financial Times* today?' It was only just a question.

Kendell nodded. 'The report about MAC's.' It was his job to read newspapers.

Clayton gave him a quick look. 'Mack's?'

'The Midwest Automobile Corporation, who own a sizeable chunk of English Motors, our main rivals,' Piers explained. 'They are to English what Greatlake (USA) is to Greatlake (UK). Everybody calls them by their initials.'

'Then I did see it,' said Clayton. 'They're in trouble. Not major trouble, but substantial. There's been a merger between two component suppliers, resulting in a monopoly. The merged suppliers put prices up and MAC's launched an anti-trust suit.'

I couldn't have put it more neatly myself, Piers thought. Aloud he said: 'Lesson - buy up your suppliers.'

Gorse put in: 'Vertical integration in order to prevent horizontal integration.'

Clayton said: 'Is this going to connect with what you were saying about management objectives?'

'Eventually.' Piers smiled briefly. Clayton was whipping the conversation along, as if *he* were at the head of the table. 'Look at the kind of tasks you've been setting yourselves in your careers to date.' He looked at Gorse. 'In marketing, you've been working on ways to get the maximum performance from your sales force and your advertising agency, motivating your dealers and streamlining your distribution.' He turned to Clayton. 'I don't know exactly how you've been working in merchant banking but if you had been a middle-management accountant in industry you would have been trying to improve your company's liquidity within the limits set by the money market and existing credit arrangements.'

Clayton nodded. 'It's much the same everywhere.'

Piers inclined his head towards Kendell. 'Your objective has been to put a company's attractive characteristics in the public eye, and hide its ruthlessness and parsimony behind a hedge of clichés.' He held up a defensive hand. 'And a very worthwhile task.'

The main course arrived, and Piers sat back to let the waitress get at the table. When she was out of his way he said: 'The point of the story about MAC's is that all those things may be of no help whatsoever in the face of a simple change in the commercial environment.'

'The objectives you have set yourselves are merely necessary conditions for success. At senior management level, the perfect performance of those tasks is taken for granted. Up until now you have been like farmers, caring for the land and planting the best seed. This is where you start working on the weather.'

He picked up his knife and fork, and the others followed suit. Kendell said: 'I think I see what you mean,' and began to repeat what Piers had said in new words.

It was only true in so far as it was boringly obvious, Piers thought as he listened to his own speech regurgitated. He

caught Clayton's eye, and suspected that he thought the same.

He narrowed his eyes against the dust blown up by the cold wind as he crossed the concrete lot to the R&D block. The factory workers called it Colditz, and Piers could see why: it was surrounded by barbed wire, powerful floodlights, and uniformed guards.

The place looked like a blockhouse. Piers stared at it as a guard frisked him at the gate. It was a squat, concrete building with tall narrow windows like slits.

A second guard came out of the door and called across: 'No need, Jenkins, that's Mr. Roper.' He ran to the gate. 'Sorry, sir, Jenkins is new.'

'That's all right,' Piers said. 'It does no harm to be thorough.'

Inside, the place was white and clinical. The air was kept dust-free, and temperature and humidity were monitored constantly, for the computers were sensitive. Piers asked for Anton Porter, and was led to a laboratory on the ground floor.

The jacket of Porter's thornproof suit was draped over a chair, and he wore a white coat on top of his waistcoat. He was sitting on a high stool, peering into an inspection chamber. Piers looked over his shoulder.

'What's this?'

Porter looked around. 'Ah - hello, Piers.' He turned back to the heavy glass porthole. 'Destruction testing of super-steels. The dials tell you everything, but I like to watch it all the same.'

Piers nodded. 'I know the feeling.'

Porter turned away abruptly. 'No good,' he said. 'The suspension would shear if the car hit the kerb. Do you know why the British can't make steel good enough for Greatlake?'

'I do, but the answer is nothing you haven't heard before. We didn't invest in new plant when the Japanese did.'

'Figures. Sit down. Cup of coffee?'

Piers had drunk laboratory coffee once before. 'No thanks,' he said.

Porter filled a Pyrex beaker with black coffee. 'I enjoy myself here, you know,' he said, indicating the laboratory with a wave of his hand. 'This is what it's all about. It annoys me that I have to spend most of my time shuffling papers behind a desk. I yearn for the hiss of Bunsen burners and the smell of hydrochloric acid. Do you sometimes wish you could get your hands dirty more often?'

'Not in the least,' Piers replied. 'But I do find this a relaxing place to visit. I'm not at all sure that's a good sign.' He smiled, to show he did not mean it.

'Did you come here just to relax?'

'No.' Piers paused. 'Anton, is your hot line into English a two-way thing?'

'What on earth do you mean?'

Piers laughed. 'Sorry. I just meant can you ask questions.'

'Yes. We've -'

'I don't need the details. I'd like you to ask about the state of their research into alternatives to the lead-acid accumulator as a car battery.'

Porter frowned. 'Certainly. May I ask why?'

Piers stood up. 'Do you mind if I play my cards close to my chest for a while, Anton? I'll let you in on it as soon as you need to know.'

'Not at all. I'm only idly curious. Leave it with me.'

'Thank you. I'll leave you to your Bunsen burners now.'

Piers left the laboratory and went out into the cold, dusty wind. He wondered whether he might have enjoyed being a scientist. The smell of hydrochloric acid . . . Anton Porter was slightly eccentric, he decided. There were no Bunsen burners in his lab, and the white coat was only an affectation. Scientific research was probably as much of a rat-race as any other business.

The sky was dark, and evening was coming early. Piers hurried to get back into the warm.

He lay in bed for a few moments after he woke up. A bleak February sun was glittering through the window, and it gave an illusion of warmth. Piers felt good.

He got up, put on a track suit and running shoes, slipped

his key into a pocket, and went outside.

The sunshine in his bedroom window had been deceptive: the air was bitterly cold as he started to run. He went down the unpaved lane, vaulted a stile, and ran along the grassy path at the edge of a field. He could hear hundreds of birds.

There was something to be said for working in the Midlands: you could live in the country. The only dawn chorus to be heard at his London flat was sung by pneumatic drills.

He got warmer, found his second wind, and increased the length of his stride. He was proud of his ability to run, and enjoyed it. It kept his body thin and his muscles springy.

The studs on his shoes bit into the mud as he climbed a short rise. At the top he was able to see that there had been a morning mist, which was now lifting.

He ran downhill towards the cottage, deliberately pushing himself a little faster than he could comfortably go. When he arrived at his garden gate he was flushed and panting. He stood there for a moment, getting his breath back.

The paper boy from the village came up the lane on his bicycle. His hand, blue with cold, held a lighted cigarette. He took Piers' copy of *The Times* from his sack and handed it over. 'Short o' wind, are you?' he said cheekily.

Piers took the newspaper. He pointed to the boy's cigarette. 'This is how you'll get if you smoke. Let it be a warning.'

'Who wants to live to be old?' the boy replied with a grin. He turned his cycle around and headed back down the lane.

Piers took his muddy shoes off at the door and went into the house. He rather liked the paper boy. Most children found Piers too forbidding to converse with.

He stripped off his track suit, showered, and shaved with a safety razor. He went into the kitchen in his dressing gown. The kitchen was big, and full of modern equipment which he never used. But then, he had not furnished the cottage for one.

He trimmed the fat off three rashers of bacon and put them under the grill, dropped a slice of wholemeal bread into the toaster and started the coffee pot before going back to the bedroom.

The bedroom was worst of all. It was a very feminine

room, because he had chosen everything with her in mind. There were roses in the wallpaper, and a deep soft carpet; and the duvet cover matched the curtains; and there were two wardrobes and two dressing tables; and everything was pretty prints and shades of pink.

He dressed quickly: black briefs, black socks, no vest; a white shirt, a black knitted tie, a charcoal suit with a faint pin stripe. Anne had bought him a red shirt, and made him wear it, against his better judgment. To please her he had bought a dozen like it, and now they mocked him from the wardrobe. He had reverted to his lifelong habit of wearing white shirts.

He laced his shoes and looked in the full-length mirror. This was how he looked every day. The suits varied slightly: some were black, others lighter shades of grey; and at weekends he wore herringbone jackets and charcoal trousers; but the effect was always the same: elegant, expensive, and utterly conventional.

Satisfied, he went into the kitchen. He stood well away from the cooker as he turned over the bacon. By the time he had poured coffee and buttered toast, it was ready.

The one-eyed washing machine glared accusingly at him as he sat down to eat. It was never used; he took his laundry back to town for Mrs. Williams to deal with. The freezer, the food mixer, the rotisserie: none had ever been switched on. If only Anne –

He forced his brain to change tracks, and picked up the paper. He skipped through it quickly, unable to concentrate on any one story. He was about to turn to the crossword when a job advertisement caught his eye. He read it with growing interest.

The advertisement said: 'Physicist specialising in electrolysis with some engineering background. £25,000 a year at our new laboratories in Switzerland, heading up a research project for a UK company.' It gave the name of a staff agency, Personal Personnel, and a West End address.

It was the money which gave the game away. The Head of Research for Greatlake (UK) earned less than that.

How many research physicists were there in the country, Piers wondered: ten thousand? Suppose five hundred of

them specialised in electrolysis, and one per cent of those had an engineering background. That meant there would be five people who might answer the ad.

At least one of them was doing battery research for English Motors. The trap was sprung.

Piers put his crockery in the dishwasher and switched it on. He picked up his coat, hat and briefcase and went out to the car.

He took a roundabout route to the office and stopped half way, while he was still in the countryside, to use a telephone kiosk.

First he called Austin Ratcliffe. While he was waiting to be put through, he fed a pound's worth of florins into the coin box. If the pips were to go in the middle of the conversation, Ratcliffe might justifiably wonder why the Managing Director of a large corporation was ringing from a call box. Piers's request was going to be curious enough as it was.

Ratcliffe came on the line. 'You're bright and early, Roper!'

'Morning. We at Greatlake never sleep, you know.'

Ratcliffe laughed. 'Look, I don't want to go into details over the telephone, but initial reaction to the little scheme you and I dreamed up is favourable. I think we should meet again.'

'Splendid,' Piers said. 'Shall I put out one or two discreet feelers in the City?'

'Oh, yes. Let's not delay on this project.'

'Good. Now, may I ask a favour? It's not connected with this business.'

'Surely.'

'Can you find out for me whether any UK company has built, or is building a research lab in Switzerland?'

'How far do you want to go back?'

'Two years.'

'That's easy. The answer is No. I would certainly know about an outflow of funds of that magnitude.'

'Thank you. I'll call you again to arrange a meeting – perhaps when I, too, have some news.'

'Goodbye, Roper.'

Piers depressed the cradle and dialled another London number. The call was answered very quickly.

'Palmer.'

'Roper.'

'You've been reading *The Times*.' Palmer's voice always sounded low, almost intimate, as if he were in the habit of holding the mouthpiece very close to his lips.

'You noticed it.'

'It's obviously a phoney. Do you know anything about it?'

'Yes. I suggested to our Head of Research that he ask his sources what the opposition are doing about alternative car batteries.' Piers looked around as he spoke, but there was no-one within earshot of the kiosk.

'Ah.'

'Will you get in touch with the client? If one of their research people takes a day off, I want to know. Especially if he's a keen skier.'

Palmer chuckled. 'Certainly.'

'Thank you.' Piers hung up and stepped out of the phone box.

'Hello, Roper!' There was surprise in the voice.

Piers turned around quickly, startled. He saw William Winter, his company secretary, walking towards him on the narrow country pavement, briefcase and umbrella in hand.

'Good morning, Willy.'

'Car broken down?' Winter slowed his brisk walk to a stop.

Piers thought fast. 'I remembered I'd left the grill on, and stopped to ring a neighbour. No, the car's all right.'

Winter nodded. 'I wish I could say the same for mine. Wretched thing refuses to start every other morning. That's why I'm walking to the station.'

'Let me drive you.'

'Thank you.'

They got into the car. As he pulled away Piers said: 'What do you drive?'

'A pestilential Holmes Diplomat. Damn thing must be a Friday car. You should have one, you know. Public relations.'

Piers smiled slightly. The secretary was nicknamed wintry Willie: his criticisms of both people and systems were never less than caustic. 'Detroit suggested it, quite firmly,' Piers said. 'I told them that Greatlake wasn't going to pervade my private life to that extent.' He was glad they were well off the subject of his phone call. His off-the-cuff excuse was full of holes: he had no neighbours within a couple of miles, and there was no reason for any of them to have a key to his home. He had not known Winter lived out here: he must check the addresses of all his senior staff, and be sure he didn't make clandestine phone calls anywhere they were likely to pass. Damn. There were so many checks and precautions needed.

Winter was speaking. '... come to dinner. Elizabeth will tell me off: I hadn't realised you lived on our side of the city.'

'I haven't been there long. And I go back to town a good deal.'

'I've laid a green - you could practise your putting. Come one Sunday.'

Piers was an unenthusiastic golfer, but he decided it would be churlish to say so now. 'Thank you. I'd like to come.'

There was silence for a while. Piers switched on the radio and they listened to the news. The bleak, damp Midlands countryside gave way to pre-war suburbia, and then to monochrome industrial scenery. Piers saw the top of a Greatlake factory chimney in the distance.

He said: 'I planned to have a word with you this morning, Willy. I've been recommended to use a staff agency called Personal Personnel. Have you heard of them?'

'No. What level of staff do they deal in?'

'Executive. Oh, I wouldn't have bothered you with it otherwise.'

'An agency is never the best way to recruit. We prefer to pirate someone we know.'

'I agree. But if we have to use them, let's get the best.'

'I'll check them out.'

'Thank you.' Piers slowed the car and swung into the Greatlake entrance. Two security guards saluted as he swept by.

Three

It was a prestige office for a small African country's tourist board. Nobody in his right mind would go there for a holiday: but the office had a wide glass frontage in Piccadilly, with trendy couches in the windows. Piers went in, picked up a handful of tourist brochures, and made himself comfortable.

The message from Palmer had been brief: 'Mr. Coombs has to go to a funeral tomorrow.' Later Piers had found, in the pigeon-hole at the club, an envelope containing a photograph of a bearded young man in corduroy jacket. He had taken it to the flat and burned it in the kitchen sink.

He had now been watching the offices of Personal Personnel for six hours. He had studied the window of every shop within sight of the agency's small entrance; he had spent more than an hour on a stool in a sandwich bar; he had walked the fifty-yard stretch of pavement opposite; and he had leaned against a wall reading the racing edition of an evening newspaper. He had been saving the tourist office for the footsore end of the day.

He wondered how long he could stay here: an hour? There were no other customers for jungle safaris or for the country's one-jet airline. It must be obvious he was not seriously reading the advertising literature, for his eyes were continually on the pavement outside.

He stubbed his cigarette and looked for another: the packet was empty. He had smoked forty since breakfast. He sat forward suddenly as a bearded man passed; then relaxed – the man had long hair, and a jacket with LEB stamped on the back.

It was not the boredom, Piers reflected, as much as the indignity of the business. Hanging around on the street watching a doorway reminded him too much of the old days, when he had only just joined Palmer's organisation. Then he had been a very junior executive in the company he was spying on. Nowadays he expected to come by information as he sat in his office, warm and comfortable.

Still, it was essential. He had to know the route followed by the information leaking out of English.

Piers almost missed him when he did go by. His beard and hair had been trimmed, and he wore a raincoat over a striped three-piece suit instead of a corduroy jacket: he was dressed for an interview. Piers stood up and stepped quickly outside, just in time to see the scientist disappear into the doorway of Personal Personnel.

It was enough, he thought, standing on the pavement. He would learn no more by waiting for the man to come out again.

He began to walk east. He could visualise what was happening inside the office. The interviewers would be skilled. They would comment favourably on Coombs's qualifications, talk casually about promotion and salary increases, and draw big, vague schemes in the air. They would ask him about his work, pretend to be impressed, but wonder whether his field was exactly the one they were interested in. Could he be more specific? Yes, it sounded very favourable, but what successes had he achieved?

And unless he was more shrewd than most scientists, Coombs would be giving away secrets left, right and centre.

The interview for the phoney job was a tactic Piers and Palmer had often used. The fact that the opposition was using it now was most interesting. It showed that they did not have blanket coverage of English's secrets.

He found himself outside Fortnum's, and decided to have tea. He walked slowly through the shop, savouring the

unique smell of the place – it always seemed vaguely Eastern and exotic, although it was only a glorified grocer's – while half his mind played with possibilities.

Several had been eliminated today; but the operation was not going to be as simple as he had thought. It would have been straightforward if, after his enquiry about battery research, one of English's executives had suddenly started asking questions about the subject; or the file had gone missing; or plumbers had been called in to the laboratory. The interview technique, though useful for a one-off investigation, could not provide a steady flow of information such as Greatlake had been getting from English.

Piers bought a stone jar of marmalade and went down the steps at the back of the shop, past the huge musical clock, into the Tea Rooms. He looked around for a vacant table.

He saw her just as she glanced in his direction, and their eyes locked for a moment. Piers took a pace in another direction, then realised it was too late to pretend he had not seen her. He stepped back, looked at her again, and bumped into someone.

'I'm terribly sorry.'

'My fault.'

He let the man pass, and looked a third time. Now she was laughing at him. Well, that was all right. He went up to her table.

'Anne.'

'Hello, Piers.' Her tone was light, as if they were acquaintances who had met just once or twice, and were pleased to see each other again. She hesitated fractionally before saying: 'Are you going to join me?'

'Oh – thank you.' He could not say he wasn't staying, for there could be no other reason for coming in; and he could not pretend to be meeting someone else, for Anne would wait and see that nobody came. 'I will.'

She said: 'How are you?'

'Very well.' He could think of nothing to say, and took refuge in her offer of clichés. 'It's a long time ...'

'Since you sacked me? Seven months and a week. Aren't you going to order?'

He looked up and saw a waitress beside him. 'Just some tea – how about you, Anne?'

'I've ordered.'

He nodded to the waitress and she went away. 'You weren't sacked, and I wasn't responsible.' He felt a little more comfortable with a direct accusation: it was small talk that bothered him. He found he could look at her properly now. Her hair was still cropped dramatically short, and her eyes as beautiful as ever . . . He wrenched his gaze away.

'Whom are you with?'

'United Chemicals.'

'Same job?'

She nodded. 'Personnel Manager.'

'I'm glad you made the transition easily.'

Anger flashed briefly in her eyes, but her tone was mild. 'I didn't say it was easy.' The tea came, and she poured for both of them. Piers lit a cigarette. Anne said: 'Have you moved North yet?'

'Yes, but I keep the flat.'

'Where do you live when you're at Greatlake?'

'Our cottage.' He bit his tongue; he had been determined not to say anything so revealing. He drank tea to cover his embarrassment.

She changed the subject, but the mockery stayed in her eyes. 'Does Greatlake prosper?'

'Not really. There is the small consolation that the motor recession is international.'

'Poor Piers. Success is so important to you, yet the economic dice are loaded.'

'I dislike being patronised.'

'It's the nearest thing to a weakness that you have.'

He gave a cold smile. 'I suppose that's a compliment.'

'Egocentric as ever. There are shortcomings which aren't weaknesses; but you always thought strength was the only virtue.'

Piers looked away. Was there a trace of affection in her *badinage*? Seven months and a week, she had said. It was right, because he had been counting too. But for her, it was the time since she had lost her job. For him, it was the time since he had lost her.

'Are you happy?' he said.

'People who ask themselves whether they're happy always get No for an answer. Happiness is a direction, not a place.'

'You sound like the *Readers' Digest*.'

She laughed, then, and he realised that was what he had been longing for. It was a rich, throaty chuckle, almost masculine; and it brought to mind days of hopeless contentment and nights of astonishing passion. He smiled, too, and suddenly the acrimony of their parting was gone, and the karma was between them, a relationship alive with fondness and respect, wit and lust.

He was looking at her face – her turned-up nose, pointed chin, small ears – when her expression altered. The moment of rapport passed so quickly that Piers felt it as a physical shock. The figure of a man pushed past his chair, bent over Anne, and kissed her cheek.

'Hello, darling,' the man said.

'Darling, meet Piers Roper, Managing Director of Greatlake Motors,' Anne said. 'Piers, this is Bernard Fletcher.'

Piers stood up and shook hands. The man was in his late twenties – probably a little younger than Anne – with long hair and spectacles. He wore a wide-lapelled jacket, and his printed shirt was open at the neck, showing a few sparse hairs on his chest.

He said: 'Glad to meet you.'

'How do you do.'

Fletcher looked at his watch. 'Darling, we must rush.' He had a London accent, and he was handsome in a faintly feminine way; Piers thought he was probably an actor or a photographer.

Anne stood up. 'I must get my bill.'

'Not at all,' Piers said quickly. 'You rush off.'

'Well, thank you.' She buttoned her raincoat. 'It was nice, running into you. Goodbye.' Fletcher nodded to Piers, and they walked away.

'Goodbye.' He watched them go. Fletcher put an arm around her shoulders as they left.

Piers looked down at the dirty crockery on the table. He did not see Anne glance back over her shoulder as she passed through the doorway.

He walked along the east side of Park Lane, keeping close to the kerb, watching the traffic and resenting the carbon monoxide which filled his lungs. People who stayed in the Hilton and the Dorchester probably breathed the most poisonous air in London, he thought. Perhaps not the most poisonous: policemen on point duty in Oxford Street had been known to faint from oxygen starvation. How long would it be before someone installed slot machines on the pavement selling a breath of fresh air for a shilling?

A black cab pulled over and stopped right beside him. The door opened. Piers jumped in and the taxi pulled away quickly.

He sat back and took out cigarettes. 'Hello, Palmer.'

The big man in the opposite corner of the seat took off his hat and ran a hand over his large, bald head. He touched a sheaf of papers on the seat between them. 'I'm not sure what to make of this.'

'Nor I.' Piers opened the window to let out smoke.

'First of all, there's the time it took to come through, and the fact that they used the old interview dodge. Plainly, finding these facts wasn't a straightforward operation for them.'

'Secondly, Coombs – the scientist – swears he gave nothing away in the interview.' Piers grunted in surprise, and Palmer looked sharply at him. 'Don't worry – he wasn't told the whole thing was a set-up.'

'Good.'

'Thirdly, there is information in there which could not have come from Coombs, or indeed from English, Results of research which has only just been done in Detroit.'

'Ah.' There was satisfaction in Piers's monosyllable.

The cab negotiated Trafalgar Square and turned into the Strand. Palmer said: 'Does that click with something you know?'

'Yes. I asked my company secretary to check on the personnel agency. They're owned by an American bank – the New Bank of Chicago. So we've learned two things: Great-lake's espionage is based in the USA, and the leak we're looking for is not in English Motors, but in the parent company, MAC's.' Piers tossed the butt of his cigarette out of the window. 'I'll have to go to Detroit.'

'Yes.' There was silence as the cab climbed the hill to St. Paul's.

Piers pointed to the statues in front of the facade. 'See how leprous they look? The stone is crumbling since they were cleaned. London is one of those cities: clean it up and it falls apart.'

There was no response from Palmer. Piers shrugged, and waited for him to say what was on his mind.

Eventually Palmer said: 'You've done very well for me, Piers. I've never had a spy who became Commander-in-Chief of the enemy forces. I'm not sure I've been using you to the maximum benefit.' He paused as they passed the Bank of England. 'One day I'll have you in there.' He grinned. 'No, you're too big a fish to fiddle about with routine R&D reports and advertising campaigns. You're in contact with Government Ministers, top American businessmen, chairmen of nationalised industries. I want you to concentrate on the kind of intelligence which will enable me to predict which companies are going to the wall, which will be nationalised, what is in the Budget . . . the big stuff.' He pulled aside the glass partition and spoke to the cabbie. 'Drop me off just past the next junction.' He closed the glass again. 'Go to Detroit, find out who's spying on MAC's – but catch me some big fish.'

Piers nodded. 'You still need routine R&D reports from Greatlake.'

'That's easy. I'm putting a new man in.'

The taxi stopped, and Palmer pushed past Piers and opened the door.

Piers said: 'Hadn't you better tell me the new man's name, so I can be sure to give him the job?'

The big man got out and turned around, leaning inwards so that his shoulders filled the gap between door and taxi. 'See if you can guess,' he said. 'You hired him a month ago.'

The door slammed and the cab pulled away.

The MD's office was as Piers liked it, at last. The filing cabinets had been moved into Audrey's office or disguised, the wall-charts and giveaway calendar had been replaced with some of his pictures, the vast utilitarian desk had been taken away

to make room for a smaller, antique table. In the other arm of the L-shaped room were club chairs and a coffee table.

He stood at the top end of the L, one hand in a pocket and the other holding a cigarette, and reported, in spare, quiet sentences, his conversations with Ratcliffe about the invalid car project. As he spoke, half his mind was on the bombshell dropped by Palmer. He looked at the team of executives on the club chairs, drinking coffee and making notes on cardboard folders, and wondered which was the spy.

The company secretary and the production manager were not in the frame, as Palmer had said the spy was a new man. Certainly the Chairman, Lord Shipley, sitting a little apart from the others as if to emphasise his observer status, did not count. It had to be one of the new boys: Kendell Clayton and Gorse.

As head of Public Relations, Kendell was in a lousy position to do any spying. He was one of the last to learn of new projects; he was only here today because the publicity potential of the scheme under discussion was vast. He could not be eliminated, but he was an unlikely suspect.

So was Gorse. He was one of the first to learn secrets, but he was a company man: his history was well known, he was loyal.

Piers was betting on Clayton. A certain psychology was required for espionage, and Clayton possessed it. He was intelligent, cautious, withdrawn, self-sufficient, arrogant.

Piers said: 'In short, we've bullied the Government into helping us. Now I want us all to do some preliminary thinking. Kendell, you know the PR in this is big stuff.'

'Terrific,' Kendell said eagerly. 'Our designs ought to be worth a spread in a colour magazine. The - '

'Good,' Piers said, cutting him off. 'Work out all the angles and give me a report.' He turned to the company secretary. 'Willy, it's not too soon to start preparing the ground with the unions, in an informal way. No details yet; just some warning noises about the motorcycle business.'

Winter knew enough about Piers not to say anything when he had nothing to say. He nodded.

Piers went on: 'Our production and marketing plans are already well worked out. The most important immediate

task is the financing of the operation. Clayton?’

The blond accountant turned his blue eyes on Piers, but it was clear he was more interested in Lord Shipley, for his glance kept flickering back to the Chairman. ‘This is a case in which we want to go to the capital market,’ he began. He started to talk about merchant banks and the stock exchange, and Piers’s mind slid sideways again. He wondered about Shipley’s motives in putting Clayton on the Board. There was no doubt the man was an asset, but Shipley was a deep man, and Piers was careful not to underestimate him. The Chairman had a habit of taking a long view: did he see Clayton as Piers’s successor? He was bound to see the lad as an influence on Piers; someone to keep him on his toes.

And how far did Palmer share Shipley’s motives? If Clayton was indeed Palmer’s man, what was his brief? He was younger than Piers, and quite possibly cleverer: was he supposed to keep Piers on his toes for Palmer?

He reminded Piers of someone.

He finished speaking. Piers said: ‘Fine. Take some soundings and let me have a report.’ He preferred his people to write things down, because it forced them to make up their minds. It was too easy for executives to be non-committal in conversation.

The conference was over: it had been brief, like all Piers’s meetings. Shipley stood up. ‘I must go. I’ll keep my ear to the political ground, Piers.’

They trooped out. Piers looked at his watch and said: ‘Clayton, will you stay for five minutes? We should go over a couple of things.’ The Financial Director turned in the doorway and came back in. Piers said: ‘Sit down. Let me wash my hands.’ He went into the small bathroom.

He combed his short hair in the mirror, then brushed the shoulders of his jacket. Was this too obvious to work? If Clayton was as cautious as he ought to be, he would smell a rat. But then, he had no reason to think Piers was anything other than an ordinary MD.

Well, it would do no harm. Piers flushed the water closet and washed his hands. When he came out Clayton was sitting down staring at a painting on the wall.

‘Like it?’ Piers said.

'Not much.' Clayton sat upright.

'I won't keep you. I just want to suggest one or two - damn.' His phone buzzed, and he crossed to his desk to pick it up. 'Yes? Oh . . . very well.' He cradled the handset. 'Sorry, Clayton, we'll have to do this tomorrow.'

'Sure.' Clayton left.

Who does he remind me of? Piers sat behind his desk, picked up the phone, and dialled 123 for the time. He unscrewed the mouthpiece and looked inside.

Taped to the plastic was a small disc about the size of a florin. Clayton had been unable to pass up the chance of bugging his MD's office. Piers screwed the receiver back on.

The lad might be bright, but he had a lot of catching up to do.

Piers smiled wolfishly.

His heart hammered furiously. He was breathing hard, so that the breath seared his lungs. He felt as he had in the Army, at the end of a four-mile cross-country race: a physical exhaustion which was so complete it was pleasant.

He summoned up the will-power to roll off the girl, and collapsed on his back.

His breathing eased quickly. He got off the bed a little before he was ready, for the girl was young, and he felt the need to prove to her that he was fit. His head ached slightly as he crossed the room and picked up his cigarettes.

The girl was sprawled on his bed, her eyes closed and her mouth open. As he watched, she sighed. Her long, dark hair was tangled, and her fringe was matted with perspiration. The skin of her belly and thighs was red with friction.

He went back to the bed and sat cross-legged beside her, putting his cigarette to her lips. She sucked, inhaled, blew smoke, and coughed weakly. She poked out the tip of her tongue and spat a shred of tobacco. Without opening her eyes, she said: 'Why can't you smoke filter tips?'

He put the cigarette to his mouth and drew contentedly. 'Because they taste like filter tips. I prefer the taste of tobacco.' He put his feet on the pillow and lay back with his

arm along her leg, his fingertips brushing the angle of her thigh and her groin.

She giggled. 'Don't tickle.'

He stopped.

He lay there until the cigarette burned his fingers, then he went into the bathroom, ran a bath for the girl, and got under the shower. When he came out she was lying in the bath, slowly soaping her full breasts. He tore his eyes away and went back into the bedroom.

He dried himself and dressed in grey trousers, a white shirt and a black tie. The evening paper was on the mat in the hall. He picked it up, went into the drawing room and poured himself a drink.

The Stock Exchange was down on the day, and Greatlake had led it. It was a minor fall, probably a consequence of the announcement that Piers was going to America. There were always a handful of pundits who would think he had been called over to be carpeted.

Gold was up, which pleased Piers. About half his personal fortune was in gold.

'Can I have a drink?'

He looked up from the paper. She had dressed, combed her hair, and made up her face. Good. 'Help yourself.'

The hint of a frown crossed her face as she went to the cupboard. She mixed gin with tonic and came to sit on the arm of his chair. He put the paper down.

'I'm going to America next week.'

'Lucky you.' Her lipstick smeared the glass as she drank.

'I've a lot of work to do before I go.'

'Okay, okay, I'm just going. I'll be here when you get back.'

'Monica.'

'Piers.' She got off the chair and went back to the drinks cupboard, keeping her back to him.

'I don't think we should see each other again.'

She raised her head and spoke to the wall. 'I wondered why you didn't pour my drink,' she said quietly.

Piers wanted a cigarette, but he felt that to move at all would be a sign of weakness. 'This was never far away - you know that.'

'Do I?' She turned to look at him at last. 'I'm a call girl, Piers.'

'At the moment you're not acting like one.'

She ignored him. 'Do you know what a prostitute is? A poor girl who wants to be rich. I'm also pushing thirty, which means I won't be able to earn £100 an hour much longer. There are only two ways for me to go now, Piers. One is the long road that starts in Curzon Street and ends under the railway arch at Charing Cross. The other is to marry a john. I thought you might be my john. You like me, you're rich, clever, civilised – you're even kind, unless it suits you to be cruel, like now. I thought you might marry me eventually, Piers. But I was never in the running, was I?'

He couldn't think of anything to do but be honest. He shook his head. 'No.' He wanted to move, to get up, but he felt chained by her confession, her naked emotion.

'Damn you – how can you be so cool!' Her voice shook.

It seemed to break the spell. He stood up, found a box of cigarettes, and lit one. 'Do you want advice?'

She smiled with her lips, but not with her eyes. 'Okay.'

'Get an ordinary job.'

She nodded. 'I didn't expect anything original from you.'

'What's wrong with it? Lots of people do.'

'Plenty of people are bus conductors, Piers, but how would you feel if you had to become one? I've got used to having a lot of money. Even though I wasn't born with it, it seems natural now. I couldn't be some bastard's secretary, making cups of tea and taking dictation.'

Piers shrugged. He turned and looked out of the window. There seemed nothing left to say. She had thrown herself at him, he had caught her, held her for a moment, and put her down. He had not deceived her; she had deceived herself. He was not insensitive to her distress, except insofar as he was – what was the Biblical phrase? – hardening his heart. But there was nothing he could do about it, except to marry her, and that would condemn them both to a life of misery.

As he looked out at the urban skyline, the red-hot edge of the sun sank behind a roof, and suddenly it was much darker. He turned to put on the light, and saw that she had gone. He heard the door slam.

It was 5.30. There would still be someone at the landlord's offices. He picked up the phone and dialled.

'Roper here. 2A Havering Avenue. I want you to change the lock on my front door.'

Four

The weather was warm and overcast as Piers crossed the tarmac at Detroit Metropolitan Airport. He carried the black leather briefcase containing the sales graphs, balance sheets, and time-and-motion reports he had been studying on the long flight. His head still buzzed with the phrases and sentences he had been framing in anticipation of the questions he would be asked by the emperors of the world's motor industry.

The scream of jets faded as he stepped inside the terminal building. Almost immediately, he was hailed by a young man with ridiculously short hair.

'Mr. Roper?'

Piers shook the proffered hand. 'How do you do.'

'I'm Alan Zuckerman, personal assistant to Clive Ebsworth. Clive sends his regards. He asked me to welcome you to Detroit for him. He thought you'd want to rest up before you start talking business. Are you alone?'

Piers nodded. Ebsworth was Greatlake's vice-president in charge of overseas holdings, the man Piers would be seeing most of; but meeting people at airports was no part of his job.

Zuckerman seemed disconcerted by the fact that there was only one of Piers.

'Who else did you expect?'

'We assumed you'd have a PA, and perhaps a secretary. Shall we go to the car?'

The young man's accent was harsh and flat, the accent of an industrial city; and he spoke quickly, as if the systems analysts had decided that the spaces between the words were not cost-effective.

Piers was nodded through customs and immigration, and led out to a wide black limousine; one of the big Greatlake saloons with a transplanted midsection. The suspension dipped spongily as he stepped in. Zuckerman closed the door, walked around the car, and got in the other side.

A chauffeur emerged, carrying Piers's two suitcases. He put them in the boot and slammed the lid.

Piers studied Zuckerman for a moment. His head was shorn closely up to the crown, like a retired Colonel's; and what little hair was left on top was flat and lifeless. He drummed his fingers on the upholstery as the car pulled away: Piers guessed he was nervous by temperament, and not just because he was squiring a VIP.

'You're booked into a good hotel downtown. You're invited to breakfast with Clive and Mr. Brice in the morning. Is there anything you'd like to do tonight?'

'No, thank you.' Piers looked at Zuckerman. 'Did you come up through sales?'

He looked surprised. 'How did you know?'

'I did too.' Piers smiled, and saw Zuckerman relax a little. He decided not to tell him exactly how he had guessed. Every time he spoke, the younger man finished up with a question: it was a salesman's technique for retaining control of a conversation.

They followed Gratiot Avenue, a long, straight radial, into the city centre. The traffic was heavy, and all the cars looked new and expensive.

Piers said: 'What do you do with cars when they're eighteen months or two years old - sell them for scrap?'

'That's right,' Zuckerman replied, quite seriously.

The view from the hotel window stretched across the bend in the wide, grey river. Small ships occasionally disturbed

the calm water. A faint haze, either mist or smoke, obscured the town on the far, Canadian side.

Piers stood at the window sipping whisky and water. Zuckerman had offered to spend the evening with him, but Piers had sent the man back to his wife and family. Alan had said: 'If you need any shopping, the J. C. Hudson Company on Woodward has just about everything. Any problems, ring me at home.'

Later, Piers had eaten dinner for the second time. It was now eight o'clock, but in London it was one a.m. If he went straight to bed he knew he would be awake hours before dawn.

The view dissolved in twilight, and he turned away. Maybe he wanted company.

He left the suite and went down in the lift to the lobby. The bell captain's white, crewcut head was bent over his high desk. Piers folded up a 100-dollar bill and crossed to the alcove. He put his elbows on the desk, leaned forward, and extended the folded note. The bell captain looked up.

'I'd like the phone number for the best girls in town,' Piers said in a matter-of-fact tone.

The man took the note. 'My pleasure, sir.' He wrote rapidly on a scratch pad, tore off the sheet, and handed it over. Piers took the scrap of paper and turned away.

He decided to go out. So far he had only seen the main highway and the inside of the hotel. It might be nice to breathe the air, look at the people, and feel the pavement. He was wearing a light suit – he always found American central heating was turned up too high – and his coat was in his room, but the evening was not cold.

He stepped out. The doorman said: 'Taxi, sir?' Piers shook his head.

The doorman touched his elbow. 'It's getting a little late for walking, sir.'

'I shan't go far.'

He walked slowly, looking in shop windows, overhearing snatches of loud, rapid conversation, reading billboards and neon advertisements, enjoying the differentness of the place. It was not a pretty city: there seemed to be few trees or

small buildings, the roads were wide and the traffic very fast, and sounds harsh, metallic.

Rubbernecking palled, and he began to think about his clandestine mission. It was simple, in theory: Greatlake (USA) had a hotline into MAC's, and he had to find out who was on the other end. The obvious way to do it was to start at the Greatlake end and trace the connections; but that was also dangerous. What the alternatives were, he had not yet figured out.

He saw a bar, went in, and ordered whisky. It would help him sleep. There was some information he could get hold of without arousing suspicion, he thought as he leaned on the counter. He lit a cigarette. After all, this trip was supposed to be a kind of induction course, for him to get the feel of the US operation, and find out how he could make the most of the transatlantic link. It would be natural for him to ask about espionage, just as he would be asking about dealerships, design, pollution control and cash flow. But there was a limit to how much he could get by asking innocent questions.

He finished his drink. If he turned in now, it would be like going to bed at three a.m. and sleeping through to eleven. He took out his wallet. As he paid, a bearded, dark man came up beside him and dropped a bill on the counter. He held the door for Piers as they left.

It was quite dark, and the people on the streets seemed to be hanging around, rather than going somewhere. A few yards ahead, a pale teenager detached himself from the wall and began to walk in Piers's direction.

Suddenly Piers was alert. The doorman had said it was too late to go for a walk . . . the bearded man in the bar had looked at Piers's open wallet . . . the pale teenager had his right hand in a jacket pocket . . .

For a split-second, a circuit closed in his memory.

It was raining. It was always raining, in the bloody jungle or out. Here, in the heart of the metropolis, the rain collected in the craters and potholes of the road, making treacherous pools of unknown depth. Captain Roper, 23 years old, ex-

hausted, lost, and drunk, had fallen in one.

He walked on, painfully negotiating the pools and trying to recognise the street. It looked like every other slum street in Kuala Lumpur, with makeshift dwellings of wood and corrugated iron and tin cans crowded into every available space between the real buildings. He cursed the war, which was of doubtful strategic value and even less moral justification; he cursed the city for its lack of street names and lamposts; and he cursed the Chinese-Malay girl who was a worthless informer and a wonderful lay, for living in what were laughingly known as the suburbs.

He saw the one in front first. It was a small man in sandals and dark clothes, and Piers might not have seen him come out of the shadows if the moonlight had not given the face a ghastly glow.

The sudden movement made Piers start, but he relaxed again and concentrated on the puddles. When he looked sideways, he saw out of the corner of his eye another small man behind him and to the left. He glanced again at the first man, and saw the knife.

Piers glanced to the left, as if he was contemplating crossing the street. The bearded man from the bar was still behind him, a little to the left. Piers calculated the distance.

The pale teenager was about ten yards away, dead ahead. His hand started to come out of his pocket.

Piers checked his stride, spun on his right foot, shifted his weight to his left leg, and swung his toecapped shoe in a long, fast arc. It caught the bearded man on the shin – he had been closer than Piers thought. Reflex jerked the man forward, and Piers's fist came up from thigh level to connect with the nose above the beard.

He turned quickly. The pale boy stood still with his knife in his hand. The two of them looked at each other for a moment. Then the boy ran away.

Piers was breathing heavily. He looked around, unsure what to do. The bearded man staggered away, hands to his face. Piers felt disoriented: the memory from the Malayan war was so strong that he could not put it out of his mind, as

if he had just come out of a cinema where he had seen a film of it.

He forced himself to walk on. I don't even know for sure that they were muggers, he thought. The positioning . . . it could have been coincidence. I should have given them the chance to walk harmlessly past me.

But that was the mistake he had made in Kuala Lumpur.

When he saw the knife he stopped, half turned, and said: 'I am a British officer.'

Adrenalin sobered him in seconds, but his muscular co-ordination was still sluggish. He was concentrating on the one with the knife when something hit the back of his head, but he stayed conscious. Foolishly he struck out with his fist, and the knife sliced into the flesh of his forearm. The heavy thing hit the back of his head again, and this time he blacked out.

As he entered his hotel room, he fingered the ten-inch strip of skin on his forearm where no hair would grow. He had been lucky, there in Malaya: they had left him alive after taking his wallet.

He poured whisky. He would not be able to sleep now. He caught sight of the back of his hand, bruised and bloody, and realised it hurt. He swallowed the liquor and went into the bathroom to bathe it.

He was tense, keyed up, restless. He patted his hand dry and stuck a Band-Aid over the broken skin. He needed something to change his mood. His hand went to his pocket for cigarettes, and found a scrap of paper. It was the phone number the bell captain had given him.

He crossed the room and picked up the phone.

The girl wolfed her eggs with relish, but refused toast and drank her coffee black. Piers watched her with amusement, smoking and sipping tea. She was black: that had startled him when she arrived, more than it ought. He had never

made love to a black girl, but that was not by design. His liberal instincts told him he should find her much the same as all the other girls. The instincts had been wrong: she was excitingly different, forcing him to wonder whether a slave-fantasy lurked in the unmapped depths of his sexual subconscious.

She had lifted his depression, but he had not slept much. If he had to pinpoint the moment when the encounter became extraordinary, he would choose the time when, with complete self-confidence, she had taken off her wig, revealing a close-cropped, beautifully-shaped head . . . Damn. He had to think about the day ahead. He stubbed his cigarette.

The girl seemed to recognise the curtain-lowering symbolism of the gesture. She stood up. 'I've got to split.' She went into the bedroom for her coat.

Piers thought about the coming meeting. Clive Ebsworth he knew: he was the man responsible for building Greatlake's chain of factories in Europe: France, Germany, and Britain; as well as Australia and Canada. He spent a lot of time globetrotting; he had visited Piers in England twice.

Mortimer Brice was the president of Greatlake. Piers was looking forward to meeting him: any man actively holding down a job that big had to be interesting. How could one man hold enough information in his head to make any kind of decision at all at that level?

Piers put another cigarette in his mouth. The girl must be making up her face. There was a knock. He called: 'Come in,' and thumbed his lighter.

'Mr. Roper?'

He turned, surprised. He had been expecting the waiter, to clear away. He saw an attractive, slender girl of about thirty.

'Yes?'

'I'm Louise Coulson. I've been assigned as your personal assistant for the trip.'

'How do you do.' Piers stood up and shook her hand. Clearly, Greatlake took the view that it was beneath the dignity of the Managing Director of one of their subsidiaries to travel without an entourage. The attitude made him im-

patient, and he tried to conceal it. 'I was expecting Zuckerman,' he said pleasantly.

'He'll be along.' She looked at her watch. 'I'm a little early.'

'Sit down. Would you like some tea, or coffee?'

The bedroom door opened, and they both looked. Piers had momentarily forgotten about the black girl. She had done something to her face, and put on her wig; and she wore a long, elegant black coat. She looked stunning.

The two women stared at one another. Louise's mouth hung slightly open.

The black girl broke the frozen tableau. She crossed quickly to where Piers was standing, and stretched up to kiss him. She said: 'Goodbye,' then went to the door and let herself out.

Louise was speechless. Piers did not help her out. Anyone who comes to a bachelor's hotel room uninvited at breakfast time deserves to be embarrassed, he thought. He poured coffee for her.

Her flush subsided, but her voice was icy. 'I thought you might like to talk about your itinerary.'

'Certainly.'

He studied her as she talked, ignoring the times, dates, names, and mileages that she spouted. She was without the hard accent of everyone else he had met in Detroit: from what little he knew of American accents, he placed hers as coming from the civilised East, the kind of place where Kennedys stand in elections. Her clothes were fractionally out-of-date in a way Piers thought, for some reason, was typically American. Perhaps it was that American women were usually a little older than they seemed. Her face was oval, her hair long and dark.

He disliked working with beautiful girls, preferring to keep business and sex in separate, watertight compartments. The wisdom of that had been confirmed by the affair with Anne . . . Still, this girl was now distinctly cool towards him. It would be all right.

He wondered whether the incident with the black girl would filter back to the Greatlake hierarchy. It would do no harm; they were probably much more nervous of his being

homosexual. The news that he couldn't stay one night in a place without taking a girl to bed might even come as a relief.

The girl's monologue was interrupted by a knock: it was Zuckerman. He helped Piers with his light coat, then picked up the black briefcase. The three of them went down to the limousine.

There was little conversation on the short journey. Zuckerman's mood seemed to have changed from anxiety to boredom overnight, as nervous people's moods do. Louise was still offended: if he had cared, Piers would have attempted to bring her round. Instead he read the *Wall Street Journal*.

The world headquarters of Greatlake was an appropriately huge office block, fronted by acres of tinted glass. They went into the lobby and up in the elevator. A flash of irrational annoyance hit Piers: it was the routine of room, elevator, car, elevator, room. He thought briefly and longingly of the house in Scotland, and the cold, purple moors. Then he was shaking hands.

'Good to see you,' Ebsworth was saying. 'This is Mortimer Brice.'

Good Lord, he's younger than I, Piers thought. Brice was short – about five-feet-six – and deeply suntanned. His handshake was firm and very quick, and he had the bouncy step of an athlete or dancer as he walked around the table. His smile was wide. Piers guessed that he, too, had come up through sales.

'We have an English breakfast in your honour,' Brice said. 'Let's sit down – I'm starved.'

They have, too, Piers thought. There was bacon, and mushrooms, and kidneys – and where the hell had they got Cooper's marmalade? Style, it seemed, was important to Brice. But Piers's first impression was not of great intellect. Which left unanswered the interesting question – how can he make decisions as big as he does?

They began to eat – Brice, Ebsworth, Roper, Zuckerman and Louise. Brice said: 'What do you think of the trouble at MAC's?'

Piers was glad he had looked at the newspaper. 'There

wasn't a great deal of detail in the *Wall Street Journal*.'

'You should read the *Detroit Free Press* – the customers do. Fill him in, Clive.'

Piers sighed mentally, and his rating of Brice fell again. This was a crude stratagem for keeping executives on their toes – bounce the conversation from one to another with sudden questions, make them play oneupmanship among themselves. He supposed he would have to play the game. Ebsworth said: 'It started on the production line, like most problems. A machine they've been using for years without incident just failed. It killed a man. A Pole, according to Al here.'

Brice interrupted him. 'Anything strike you about that, Piers?'

Roper thought fast. 'If they'd been using the machine unmodified for that long, maybe it was time they took a fresh look at it.'

'My reaction, too. Okay, Al, you're the expert, what happened next?'

Zuckerman cleared his throat dryly. 'The union man on the spot said the machine would have to be redesigned, and the company agreed. The factory organiser for the union said there would have to be a dangerous work bonus for everyone using the machines until they were redesigned, and the company agreed. There was a protest march in Hamtrack, and the union headquarters negatived the deal.'

'Hamtrack?' said Piers.

'Polish residential area,' Ebsworth explained.

Zuckerman said: 'More Poles in Hamtrack than Warsaw. Latest ethnic group to go militant. Polack is Peautiful.' He was the only one to laugh.

Piers decided to take the bowling away from Brice. 'So what lessons do we learn from all that? How do we make sure it doesn't happen to us?'

Brice stopped a kidney half way to his mouth. 'We pay a lot of money to assorted Italian charities.'

Piers covered his surprise at such a bald admission of corruption. 'We do that already,' he said. 'So do MAC's.'

Brice seemed irritated that Piers had spoiled the oneupmanship game. 'Maybe somebody got mean, or someone else

got greedy – who knows? Let's talk about England. You got a lousy profit situation there. What are you doing about it?'

Piers suppressed a grin. He had won the game too well, by out-manoeuving the umpire. 'We're faced with the biggest sales slump in our history, just like all motor manufacturers,' he began. 'The problem is compounded by the fact that the economics of our industry are geared to growth – the next model is always bigger, faster, safer and more expensively marketed. I think there are two things we might do.

'We could put a lot more effort into the sales operation, and try to meet the problem head-on. We've never tried to sell cars the American way.'

Brice looked interested. 'What do you mean?'

'It starts with the relationship between the area sales manager and the dealer. In England, the sales manager sees his job as to help the dealer by keeping him supplied with information, ensuring smooth and fast deliveries, and so on. Here, the manager rings the dealer three times a day to say "Move that iron!" There's a similar difference in the relationship between the salesman in the showroom and the customer. The English salesman believes in being polite and helpful, and when the customer leaves without buying he says "Thank you for your interest". Here, every customer who leaves without buying is a black mark on the salesman's record. And when he has made a sale, he keeps in touch with the customer, writing to him, ringing him up to ask how the car is going, sending him literature on new models. And if he hasn't changed his car within twelve months the salesman goes to his house with the new model and takes him for a drive. Am I right?'

Ebsworth said: 'Sure. But there's a school of thought that says those methods won't work in Europe.'

'That's right. Americans are the only people in the world who will put up with that sort of thing. It means re-educating our dealers, our salesmen, and our customers.'

'Even then it might not work.'

'I'd want to test it in a small area.'

Brice said: 'I like your thinking, Piers.' He seemed to

have forgotten about playing games. 'What was your alternative solution?'

'It's not necessarily an alternative. I think we probably should do both. But the other kind of approach to the new situation is to roll with the punch – to gear the economics of the industry to falling sales.'

Brice had forgotten his breakfast. 'Go on.'

'I'd like to make a plain, cheap, simple car: slow-moving, economical to run, with no fancy engineering so that maintenance costs are low; bolt-on bodywork spares and no expensive sealed-unit mechanisms; a car I can sell for the next twenty years. Sales would be poor initially, but in five years' time the costs of production will be so low that I will be able to undercut everyone else.'

'The new Volkswagen Beetle,' Brice said.

'I hope so.'

'Christ, Piers, you don't come up with low-risk propositions, do you.'

Roper smiled thinly. 'I do; but they aren't the ones I bother you about.'

Brice looked at his watch. 'We'll talk about this again,' he said. 'Today we both have a tight schedule.'

They got up from the table. Piers said: 'There's something that intrigues me, Mortimer. Take the two ideas I've just put up to you: it seems to me impossible that one man could hold enough information in his head to make any kind of rational decision.'

Brice shrugged. 'I'm surrounded with people whose job it is to accumulate data for me. I talk to everybody, think about things in bed at night, then follow my instincts. The day my instincts let me down, it's goodbye Greatlake.'

So that's it, Piers thought. You shoot in the dark and pretend you're aiming.

As he stepped out of the hotel elevator, Piers stumbled. He felt suddenly dizzy, and put a hand on Louise's shoulder for support. 'I'm sorry,' he said.

She looked at his white face in surprise. She took his arm, led him to the suite, and put him in a chair.

He laid his head back and closed his eyes. He felt vulnerable and foolish.

'Shall I get you something?' she said.

'Whisky - scotch - and water. Thank you.'

She brought him the drink. He said: 'Perhaps I've picked up an American germ.' He hated to be ill.

'Have you been behaving uncharacteristically?'

He sipped the drink, felt better, and considered. The walk last night had been foolish; bringing the black girl to his room was indiscreet; he had felt alien and lonely in the strange city; the sudden memories of Malaya and Scotland had been oddly persistent. 'Yes,' he said.

'What did you do to your hand?'

He looked. The knuckles were blue and swollen. 'I was mugged.'

'God. What happened?'

'One of them I hit. The other ran away.'

She nodded. 'Delayed reaction from that, plus jet lag, is all you're suffering from.' She touched his forehead. 'No germ.'

Her touch was gentle. He looked up at her gratefully, and saw something like triumph in her eyes.

Five

On his way to Detroit, Piers had stopped off in New York for a few hours. With his collar and tie undone, and wearing a raincoat crumpled by being folded on the plane, he had gone to the East Side and taken a bedsitter in a cheap rooming house, in the name of Mark Tabor. In the same name he had taken a mailing address on Fifth Avenue, and arranged for all mail to be forwarded to the rooming house.

After a week in Detroit he – and Louise – had visited Greatlake's plant on the West Coast. One morning when he had no appointments he had told Louise to go shopping, and flown to a desert town where it is ridiculously easy to register companies. Supermail, Inc., had been born.

Philadelphia came next, and another free morning. He had returned to New York and opened a bank account, giving the rooming house as his address, Supermail as his employer, and Mark Tabor as his name. He had deposited 250 dollars.

It was another ten days before he went to New York officially, to talk with financiers and accountants, advertising agents, car dealers and lawyers. He also shifted his bank account to a downtown branch, deposited 5,000 dollars, and gained a credit card.

He took an apartment overlooking Central Park, giving the rooming-house landlord and his new bank as references.

He had 100 business cards printed by a 24-hour service on Madison Avenue. They read: 'Mark Tabor, Sales & Marketing Director, Supermail Inc.' They gave the mailing address on Fifth Avenue and another in the town where the company was registered.

An American passport would have been handy, but that would take a little longer.

'Have you any family?' Piers asked. He heard Louise laugh, and turned his face into the wind to look at her. 'Did I say something funny?'

'Don't you realise?' The cold, damp air was making her eyes water. 'We've travelled thousands of miles together, and rarely been out of each other's sight for almost a month, and that's the first personal question you've asked me.'

'I'm naturally incurious.' He leaned on the rail and looked over the water to Long Island. He had not really wanted to come on this tourist trip, but there had been a free day in his itinerary, and Louise had suggested it. 'Don't you want to tell me?'

'I have a mother in Boston, and a brother here in New York. My father died.'

'I'm sorry,' Piers said mechanically.

'How about you?'

'None. My father lived a short, happy life. My mother died soon after he did. No siblings.'

'Do you live alone?'

'Most of the time. An elderly couple live at the house in Scotland, to look after it – I'm rarely there. I have a housekeeper in London, but nobody at the cottage.'

'Three homes! Greatlake (UK) must be doing better than I thought.'

'My father left some money. It's cold – let's sit down.'

The slatted wooden seat was below the level of the rail, and sheltered from the wind. It would have been very easy to put his arm around the girl, but he refrained, and felt a little awkward as a result. He thought back over the month, and realised she was right: he had displayed little interest in her, except as an assistant. People took him to be distant,

haughty; but he thought Louise had learned to live with that. He couldn't believe she found him a complete bore. One had instincts about that sort of thing, after all.

She also liked pictures. Together they had been sated with French paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago, stared entranced at *Le Bal a Bougival* in the Boston Museum, disliked almost everything in the Museum of Modern Art on West 53rd Street, and even looked at some superb Mexican murals by Diego Rivero in Detroit.

Her features were classically regular in full face, but her profile was angular. Her skin was tanned: once, when she had worn a loose shirt, Piers had glimpsed the curve of one small, brown breast, and involuntarily imagined it fitting into the palm of his hand. By US standards she was not a very liberated woman: here in matriarchal America, of all places, radical feminism was shrill and demanding, but it had not affected Louise. If he had wanted a lover . . . but he did not; and he remembered Anne.

'Have you been married?' he asked her, not quite seeing how the question connected with his train of thought.

'Almost.' She grinned at his mystified expression. 'I had a long engagement and broke it off. Boy-next-door story. But no.'

'Nor I. There was - ' He broke off. There was no earthly reason to tell her that.

'You don't much like to talk about yourself, do you?'

'It's a boring topic.' It always struck him as being slightly indecent. 'But I'm aware I often seem . . . ungrateful. You've been a good secretary and a marvellous travelling companion. Let me take you to dinner one night, before I go back. This time I'll arrange it all. Would you?'

'Thank you.' The wind was making her eyes smart again.

The headquarters of the New Bank of Chicago was in Manhattan. Piers supposed it had once been a local outfit. Certainly the office he sat in betrayed no signs of provincialism.

The modern art on the walls was original, if a little obscure; the secretary outside had been both decorative and

intelligent; the furniture, also modern, was well-chosen; and the room was light and spacious.

Piers had been kept waiting. He was not used to that. He had made an appointment, and arrived on time. But now he was no longer MD of Greatlake (UK), but Sales Director of Supermail, Inc. He had been made to feel like a supplicant, and he disliked the role.

'Sit down Mr. Tabor,' said Paul Anthony. 'You sound like a Limey.'

Piers was tempted to say, And you look like a Wop. 'Thank you. I grew up in London, hence the accent.' Anthony was in charge of the bank's Foreign Division. If Personal Personnel, and the New Bank of Chicago, were part of the channel by which MAC's secrets reached Greatlake, then this man had to know about it.

'Tell me about Supermail.' Anthony offered a tipped cigarette. Piers refused, and lit one of his own.

'We're specialised import-export people,' he said. 'You may have seen our ads - "We go shopping all over the world". I wrote that line myself.'

Anthony shook his head without disturbing one of his carefully-combed hairs. 'Can't say I have.'

'In fact most of our business is importing speciality foods and small items of craftsmanship from England - antiques, smoked salmon from Harrod's, you know the sort of thing.'

'Who do you deal with at that end?'

Piers mentioned the first reputable name that came into his head. 'Great Universal.' They would only check if they were interested in lending him money; and he intended to pitch his application so that it was bound to be refused.

'Uh-huh. Now, what is the expansion you have in mind?'

'Simply that we want to set up an office in London. That way, we get the commissions we're now paying our English agents. Also, we can enlarge our business the other way - buying in the States for UK customers.'

'Sounds like good thinking. Do you plan to move to London?'

'No, we'll take on local staff. I'm moving to New York.' Piers smiled. 'I don't suppose you can recommend me somewhere to live?'

Anthony took the bait. 'Hell. I live in Connecticut, but the commuting's purgatory.' He was tapping buttons on his desk calculator. 'How much money do you need?'

'About 25,000 dollars. I -'

'That's just about what I make it. Mr. Tabor, I'm going to have to turn you down. Who recommended you to us?'

'Not sure. I heard you were keen on investing in England, that's all.'

'Well, that bit's right, but we're not interested in small potatoes. Loans of this size aren't our policy.'

'It could get bigger.'

Anthony stood up. 'When it does, you come back to me, y'hear?'

Piers spent the rest of the morning shopping for the new apartment. He bought crockery and linen, various foods that would keep indefinitely, and a stock of liquor. The place was already furnished, anonymously but tolerably.

He also bought three complete outfits of undistinguished American ready-to-wear clothes.

In the afternoon he set about ringing every Paul Anthony in Connecticut. He offered the housewives who answered a line in consumer credit.

The ninth housewife said: 'You're wasting your time - my husband's a banker.'

Piers made a note of the address. He said: 'Okay, lady, I give in. Listen, I'm calling from a kiosk and I'm about to quit. What's the nearest railroad station?'

She told him, and he made a note of that, too.

'In my job, you move around a lot, people come right into your life for a while then disappear completely - you don't get to make close friends.' Louise had her elbows on the tablecloth, and rested her chin on one small fist. The low restaurant lighting made her eyes look bigger.

Piers said: 'Nor husbands.'

'Nor, come to that, lovers.'

'I know.' They were both feeling the first flush of intoxi-

cation, Piers realised dimly. He had drunk several large measures of scotch before the meal, and the second bottle of champagne was almost finished. They had each eaten a large angry-red lobster, and decided they could eat no more. Brandy and coffee were on the way.

Piers had that sated, lazy, lascivious feeling which always came after a good meal with a beautiful woman. It took the crisp edge from his conversation, and softened the armour of his conceit. It was something drink alone could never bring.

He said: 'It's part of the price of being one of the new breed, the mobile executives. One never puts down roots.'

She seemed to be watching his face. 'Might you have been happier, doing something else?'

The corners of his mouth turned down in an expression of doubt. 'I might have taught mathematics to ungrateful teenagers at Eton. There is a place for roots, if you want them. I suppose I could have made the army my home. Then I might have been contented, but that's not happiness.'

'You would have had friends.'

'I'm not totally without them now. The really worthwhile friendships survive one's mobility.' He thought then of Anne, and Palmer, and Geoffrey, his perennial chess opponent at the club; but mostly of Anne. Was it mobility that killed that friendship? No, something else...

'What?'

'I said, what were you thinking of, then?'

He gave a slight laugh, and made a dismissive motion of his hand. 'You put it out of my mind.'

'You looked very sad, suddenly.'

'The conversation has taken a somewhat maudlin turn.'

She smiled broadly. 'Put it away again.'

'What?'

'Your English reserve. It's been slipping gradually, but now it's back in position. I prefer you without it. Put it away again.'

Piers picked up his brandy. He could not remember seeing it arrive. He had replies for remarks like that; defences to protect his defences; but the reflexes did not work. Somehow he did not care. He said: 'The brandy's good.'

She sipped. 'Good? That's a vague word. There must be an appropriate term.'

'Judicious.'

She tilted her head back and laughed. 'Perfect!' The line of her throat was wonderful: a pre-Raphaelite neck. She would throw her head back like that in passion, baring her teeth and gasping for air. Piers emptied his goblet and raised a hand at a waiter.

The man brought the bottle to the table and poured for Louise as well as Piers. The diversion helped Piers discipline his train of thought.

Louise said: 'It's a good word for you, too. Judicious.'

'I've been called worse things.'

'Such as?'

'An emotional cripple.' *Damn you, Anne, damn you.*

The laughter had gone from the girl's eyes. 'Did she hurt you, Piers?'

Christ, yes. 'How did you know?'

'I told you about my engagement. It wasn't broken off by me.' She lifted her shoulders slightly and let them fall: a shrug, or a flinching away from pain; Piers could not tell. 'It passes.' She put her hand across the table hesitantly, then, as if making up her mind, she rested it on his. 'Believe me, Piers, it passes.'

'I believe you.' *But there will always be a small scar.*

He looked at her face for a moment; then down at the table; then her face. She gazed steadily at him. Finally, almost wearily, he rested his other hand on hers.

He said: 'I think I n-need you.'

Her eyes filled with tears, but here there was no breeze.

They sat close together in the taxi, and he put his arm around her. She huddled against him, then looked up into his face, as if waiting for him to speak. He wanted to kiss the tip of her nose. He could not let her go, he felt: could not say Goodbye outside her hotel then drive back to his own, and spend the night awake, and wishing. Yet he flinched from summoning her to his hotel room, as if she were a whore. It had been in a hotel bedroom that she had seen the

black girl. He cursed his indiscretion. He wished the cab would go more slowly, so that he could think.

They drew up outside an hotel. It was less opulent than the one at which Piers stayed. Louise made no move to get out. Piers made up his mind.

'I have a flat,' he said.

She looked surprised.

'I thought I might need it . . . whenever I come here. No-one knows about it – it's somewhere for me to hide, to get away from telephones and messages. Would you – shall we – will you come home with me, Louise?'

She nodded silently and rested her head on his shoulder.

He leaned forward and gave the driver his address.

She did not speak on the journey. She sat with her head against his chest, looking out of the window. He closed his eyes, letting his hand caress her arm, smelling her hair. It was as if the conversation, the exchange of life histories, the probing of attitudes had served their purpose, and now there was only waiting.

He tipped the cabbie extravagantly, because he was too drunk to bother figuring out 12½ per cent of 11 dollars.

In the lift he held both her hands and looked at her face, running his eyes over the lines and planes of her features, studying detail, as a sculptor might trace a head with his fingertips.

When they stepped into the apartment and he closed the door, he felt a sense of finality, of commitment. He had abandoned the habitual caution of a lifetime, and now there was nothing left to lose. He leaned against the door and drew her to him. He kissed her gently, savouring the first electric shock of intimacy; then she pressed her body against his and opened her mouth.

Finally she drew away, breathless. Piers wanted to make love to her immediately; to feel her skin with the palms of his hands, and bury his face in her throat, without going to bed, without undressing. But he thought she might want to be seduced, slowly; and he wondered how to ask her.

He had a moment of panic. It was a long time since he had been in this position – he was not accustomed to the role of seducer.

He said quietly: 'Would you like a drink?' He almost added 'first'.

'Mmm. Have you a judicious brandy?'

'Well, it's not Californian, anyway.' Holding her hand, he led her to the living room. She sat neatly on the end of the sofa while he made drinks.

'The apartment doesn't match your personality,' she said.

He sat beside her and looked around at the colourful Persian carpet, the reproductions on the wall, the kidney table bearing the antique telephone, the ornate cocktail cabinet. 'I suppose I'll furnish it myself eventually.' He had none of his records, of course; and although there was a transistor radio, the one time he had tried it he had only been able to get soul music or boring pop songs. Some music would have been appropriate, he felt.

The brandy was good, but he had had enough. He wondered whether she needed more. Damn, he thought, at this rate I could spend all night developing a strategy. He took her glass from her hand and placed it on the rug with his own. Then he touched her chin with his fingertips, turning her head, and kissed her.

She kissed him back, enthusiastically, putting her hands behind his head and pressing his face to hers. He touched her breasts, exploring their shape through the soft material of the dress; and they nestled in his hands just as he had imagined they would. Suddenly he wanted more than anything else in the world to kiss them.

He moved a hand to her hip, spreading his fingers across her belly and her thigh. She made a small noise in her throat, reached inside his jacket, and opened his shirt with a savage tug that popped buttons. She ran her hands up and down his torso, pressing her palms against the bones of his chest and tangling her fingers in the hair above his navel.

He whispered: 'Let's go to bed?'

'Yes.'

They went into the bedroom and stood on opposite sides of the bed to undress. Piers took off his clothes quickly, beginning with his jacket and shirt, then his shoes and socks, and finally his trousers and briefs. He had the irrelevant thought that he always took his socks off last, except when

he was undressing in front of a woman. He kicked his clothes into a pile and turned around.

She stood naked, looking at him; her expression shifting from shyness to a desire that was almost greedy, as her eyes took in the wide, bony shoulders, the flat abdomen, the muscular thighs, and came to rest at his loins. He knelt on the bed, stretched out his arms, and pulled her to him.

Her skin was hot, as if she had been lying naked in the sun. She seemed to want him to take control, to orchestrate her passion. At first she only reacted to his lovemaking, arching her back and grinding her hips as he kissed, and caressed, and squeezed the sensitive parts of her body. Gradually she began to explore him, digging her fingers into the hard muscles of his arms and his buttocks, dragging her lips across the white skin of his chest.

Eventually he laid her on her back; buried his face briefly in the soft mound between her legs; then raised himself over her. She was strangely innocent: the thought crossed his mind, when it was almost too late, that she might be a virgin. He did not know whether he was excited or appalled – then it was too late, and he knew that he was not the first.

At the end she threw back her head and gasped for air, as he had known she would; she sighed with deep satisfaction several times; and Piers closed his eyes and let the blinding pleasure fill his mind.

Later they made love again; and now Piers was able to restrain his own desire while he led her through three, four peaks of ecstasy; and then at last to share the final climax knowing that he had given her joy, as well as taking it.

If his personality had been fed into a computer by one of these dating agencies, the machine would have printed out: 'Louise Coulson,' Piers thought. It was not just that she was beautiful, and sexy, and intelligent; or that she, like Piers, enjoyed Impressionist painting and good cooking and Verdi; or even that she was the first woman to be genuinely glad and grateful when he made love to her.

He glanced over his newspaper, through the windscreen of the rented station wagon out to the rainswept station car

park. Nobody, yet. He returned to his thoughts.

It was, he supposed, that she liked him as he was. Women always wanted to change him: to break his ingrained habits, force him to challenge his assumptions about himself, make him consider alternative lifestyles. Louise would be content to find a space in his life for herself, without having to hack away at the undergrowth to give herself more room.

A train arrived. A few moments later the little station building began to disgorge commuters. Roper peered through the rain, staring at faces. Suddenly he recognised Paul Anthony.

The banker half ran across the tarmac, one hand clutching a briefcase, the other holding a folded newspaper above his head to keep the rain off. He reached a car, a large blue saloon. Piers started his engine.

He had rented the car in the name of Mark Tabor, and fitted it with number plates bought at a breaker's yard for 250 dollars and no questions asked.

The blue saloon pulled away and joined the line of cars waiting to get out of the lot. Piers got into the queue a couple of cars behind. He had rented an automatic, because he found it awkward to change gear right-handed.

As he emerged from the car park he fumbled a cigarette into his mouth and pressed the dashboard lighter. The blue saloon was turning another corner, a few yards down the street. Piers followed its flashing trafficator, a large cluster of red lights. A useful economy could be made there, he thought: there was no reason why the rear light assembly should not be the same on all Greatlake cars. In the UK he had already cut the alternative styles from twenty to five. The time would come when parts from different makes of car would be interchangeable.

He followed the blue saloon through the glorified suburbia of ranch-style bungalows and open-plan gardens. The car in front was huge: within three or four years it would be impossible to buy a car that big. It occurred to Piers that the motor industry possessed his thoughts in every idle moment. The industry was in the grip of a crisis, but for him it was much worse. His first loyalty was to English and MAC's, but

in order to stay useful to them he had to keep Greatlake (UK) healthy. It was, he supposed, the classic dilemma of the spy.

Anthony's car turned into a driveway, and Piers shot past. All he had achieved, so far, was to confirm that the address he had gained from his phone call was correct.

He went to the end of the road and pulled up. This was not a good area for surveillance. He had hoped for a row of shops within sight of the house: a car parked outside a shopping precinct all night arouses no suspicion. But the area was carefully residential.

He re-ran mental film of the street. It was not Millionaire's Row, but it was prosperous. The houses were all large and detached, and looked as if they might have a good deal of ground at the back. But there were no hedges, high walls or old trees: every house had a clear view of the road. There was a car in every drive – no, that was wrong. One house had no car.

He pictured the place: a wide chalet bungalow with dormer windows in the roof. There had been no curtains. The grass grew high, in a street, where every other lawn was manicured. The five-bar gate had not been opened ready for a commuting husband.

Piers turned the car and drove back, looking again at the house. It was definitely empty. It was on the opposite side of the road from the Anthony's house, and a few plots down.

He went around the block and found a small, white Presbyterian church set back from the road. He parked in its semicircular drive, beside a carefully-tended shrubbery which partly hid the car. He got out quickly, closed the door as silently as possible, and walked up the side of the church to its back.

A paling fence marked the limit of the church yard. Piers vaulted it and stood in its concealing shelter.

He found himself on the bank of a narrow stream with another paling fence opposite. The stream, which seemed to have a concrete bed – a storm drain? – divided the gardens of the houses in one street from those in the next.

He walked along the bank, avoiding the wettest patches of mud, lowering his head into the rain. He wished he had

brought a hat, but he had left his in England – a bowler seemed too ostentatious here.

It was growing dark. With the heavy rain and the low cloud, it was difficult to see. Eventually he made out the silhouette of the empty house, with its dormer windows, beyond the fence on the far side of the stream.

He jumped the stream, falling to his knees in the mud on the other side; then vaulted the fence. He wiped mud from his hand with a handkerchief.

He walked quickly across the garden towards the house, watching the lighted windows of the neighbours.

There seem to be no burglar alarms. He forced a window and climbed in. The occupants had obviously moved out. The place was bare.

His leather soles sounded like thunder on the boards of the stairs.

He went to one of the dormer windows at the front. He could see the Anthony house quite clearly.

He leaned against the wall, lit a cigarette, and settled in for the night.

As usual, it was just before dawn when he began to question the value of the exercise.

If Paul Anthony was the Transatlantic link in the espionage chain, he had to have contacts. He had to get information from somebody in MAC's and pass it to someone in Greatlake (UK). If he was a careful man, he would not conduct the business in his office. But if he was very careful, he would not do it at home, either.

Nobody had called at the Anthony's house in the evening, and the place had been dark and silent all night.

What was really needed was a team of three men following him everywhere, a plant in his office to read his mail, and a wiretap on all his phones. Such things could be arranged, and Piers would probably have to do them.

But he had wanted to have a good look at Anthony himself, first. If Piers could get a lead it would save time, money and risk.

That had been his thinking in daylight. At dawn he was cold, stiff, muddy, and sceptical.

At 7.30 a.m. Paul Anthony left for the station.

At 8.30 two children aged about twelve ran down the drive, clutching lunchboxes, and got on a school bus at the end of the road.

At 10 o'clock an ambulance arrived. Two men helped a white-haired lady out of the house and into the car, and drove off. She did not look ill, just old.

At 11.30 Mrs. Paul Anthony emerged, smartly dressed and carrying a shopping basket. She got an English sports car out of the double garage and drove away.

Piers left his post by the dormer window. He had collected his cigarette ends – there were at least sixty – in a glove envelope, not to leave traces of his presence (they were Senior Service, an unmistakably English cigarette). Now he sealed the envelope rather distastefully and pocketed it.

He went out by the front door, closing it quietly behind him. He walked casually out on to the pavement and set off for the car.

On the other side of the block he started to move more quickly. He drove fast out of the church yard.

He stopped the car out of sight of the church and the Anthony house. From the back seat he took a white overall. He struggled into it.

He drove to the Anthony house and backed into the drive.

He got out of the car, opened the tailgate, and took out a workman's black toolbox. Then he walked around to the back of the house and broke in.

It was a colour-supplement house. There was a portable colour television in the kitchen, alongside the electric carving knife and the magnetised can opener. A glossy art book lay carefully askew on the coffee table in the living room. Knotty pine panelled the wall around the spotless open fireplace.

Piers searched the place thoroughly and quickly. There

was nothing that interested him in the main rooms downstairs. He looked in the bedrooms for a wall safe, but if there was one it was remarkably well concealed. From the telephone table in the hall he took a notebook containing phone numbers.

There was a small room in the loft, reached by a step-ladder. It looked as if it might have been added to the house some years after the place had been built. Piers went up and found a study. Paul Anthony probably called it a den, he thought. There was a desk, a small refrigerator full of canned beer, and the inevitable portable TV.

Piers broke the lock on the desk with a screwdriver from his tool kit. He found some leaflets soliciting investments in a real-estate consortium, a small pistol with some ammunition, and a magazine containing photographs of women having sexual intercourse with animals.

He was running out of time. He looked around rapidly. It seemed a comfortable room: a shelf of book club editions, a rack of pipes . . . The castors under the fridge sank deep into the thick-pile carpet.

Piers frowned. There was something odd, there. He looked again. Did American refrigerators always come complete with castors? It was a piece of equipment which was rarely moved, once it had been installed. Unless –

He pushed it aside with two hands and his knee. Behind it was a safe with a combination lock. Piers bent to it, turned the dial, and listened.

He heard the sound of a car.

He went quickly down the step ladder. The car door slammed with a loud, tinny noise. All American cars closed with a solid *thunk* – it was built-in. Piers looked through the living-room window.

Anthony's wife walked around her English sports car and made for the back door.

Piers moved towards the hall, then stopped. Again he had the something-odd feeling. The drawing on the living-room wall was a genuine Renoir sketch.

There was no time left. As he went out by the front door he heard Mrs. Anthony come in by the back.

He got into the station wagon and drove away.

Five minutes later, and five miles away, he pulled off the road. He struggled out of the overalls, then swiftly changed the number plates back to the originals. He wrapped the plates and his tool box in the overalls and threw them into some bushes.

He had gained nothing, he realised as he got back in the car and pulled away. He got the address book out of his pocket and glanced through it, looking down as he drove. It was full of Christian names – Philip and Diane, Larry, John D., John A., John P. Most of them were written in a small, feminine cursive script. It would be useless. Piers thought about the Renoir. A serious collector might buy it; or someone looking for an investment to keep in a bank vault; but who would want to hang it on the wall? And in a house without burglar alarms?

It was of a piece with the rest of the interior decor, he decided. The Anthonys had style without taste.

So what?

He felt lousy. His chin itched with stubble, and his skin crawled when he thought how long he had been inside this shirt.

Palmer had been right when he said Piers ought not to be fooling around photocopying documents and trailing people. People could be hired to do that sort of thing.

It had been a bloody night, and a wasted one. He put his foot down, and the car picked up speed.

Piers stepped out of the inquiry agents' office with relief. Even the stale air of the New York streets was welcome after the suffocating atmosphere inside. The heat had been stifling, the carpets ridiculously thick, the furniture over-soft. It was a cameo of America: too warm, too thick, too soft.

It was late afternoon. He decided to walk the mile or so to the apartment. He reflected with distaste on his interview with the detective. The man had worn a mustard coloured suit and a loud tie. His hair was blond and rather too long.

Piers had not expected a wisecracking shamus with a bottle of whisky in the desk drawer. He had worked with inquiry agents in England; he knew their greatest assets were a knowledge of where to find public records, a few contacts in the police force, and an ability to persuade husbands to confess to adultery.

It had not taken long to conduct the business. Piers had given the man Paul Anthony's home and business addresses, and said that he wanted to know about everyone the banker communicated with. He had signed the cheque 'Mark Tabor'.

The man in the mustard suit had been as much a salesman as a detective, Piers thought. He had offered various surveillance packages, and been a little taken aback when Piers cut him short by choosing the most expensive.

The attempt to conceal the grubby nature of the business by clothing it in plush carpeting and marketing jargon made the thing even more distasteful: like putting on evening dress without taking a bath.

Even that hardly explained it. Why had his revulsion been so strong? It came to him suddenly: he was in the same business, and the distaste he felt was for himself.

I'm not really the Managing Director of an automobile giant, he thought; I'm a furtive little spy, breaking into houses, following people, eavesdropping on conversations, selling my company's secrets.

He wondered whether he should quit. He might buy a share in an art gallery – he had the money, now, and he could do it well.

He entered his apartment building and took the lift. Perhaps it was just that he was working in the USA, without Palmer's back-up organisation; and that the job was not going wonderfully well. He went in and closed the front door behind him.

He had a date with Louise tonight; and he was due to return to England in a day or two. His mood might change. He went from the hall to the living room.

The three men were standing in the half-dark, in a semi-circle near the door. As they moved towards him, Piers kicked the one on the left and smashed his elbow into the face of the one on the right. The third man, who was short and heavily built, simply wrapped his arms around Piers and fell over. Piers landed underneath, winded by the man's weight.

The other two took an arm each, the fat man got up, and Piers was hauled to his feet. They held him while the fat man hit him in the stomach, five times. He sagged, and the man stopped punching.

For a few seconds Piers had been reacting automatically, like a machine. Those reflexes had been programmed into his nervous system by a small, hard-muscled Sergeant called Cox. Now, ludicrously, he remembered Sergeant Cox's words: 'Officer Cadet Roper, you think too much! If you stop to think when the enemy jumps you, you'll be dead, you cunt, sir!' No less sensitive to humiliation in his youth,

Roper had learned hard, until Cox had come up behind him during a night exercise and tapped his shoulder. Piers's elbow broke the Sergeant's jaw. Cox was very proud of him.

The regular sessions in the gymnasium had kept those reflexes alive for twenty years: the sensation of a fist thudding into a canvas punchbag, a shoulder bouncing on a wrestling mat, made the feel of hard physical contact familiar. But in those twenty years no one had actually hit him. It was the psychology of fighting that had gone, he realised. That was what he needed to resist; the easy apathy of defeat.

The fat man switched on the room light, then took a pistol from his pocket and began to fit a silencer. He picked up his hat, which had fallen to the floor during the fight, and set it on his head. It was a very small hat, and looked foolish on his big head. Piers summed him up as strong but slow-moving; and turned his attention to the other two.

They were both young and tall, and their grip on him was confidently firm. One was vaguely trendy, with jeans and a blouson jacket. The other was scruffy. Piers could smell his body odour. They were looking expectantly at the thickset

~~man~~
He jerked his head at the trendy one. 'Okay, go,' he said. The man let go of Piers and went out. They heard the front door open, then close. The thickset man addressed Piers. 'Take off your clothes.'

You always stripped them, Piers remembered.

The Communist was very young, seventeen perhaps. His close-cropped head, his oriental features, his short stature, and his bad complexion all conspired to make him boyish.

He had complained to the plantation owner about some trivial matter, and when the local police had searched his room they had found a cyclostyled pamphlet called 'The correct road to freedom for the Indonesian peoples,' by Sun Yat-Sen.

The boy had been well punched about by the time Piers got to him. He had also been kept without food and water, and forced to soil himself.

Piers interrogated him in an oven-hot corrugated-iron hut at the Army base. The air outside was steamy; inside it was putrid. The stench of the terrified prisoner was nauseating.

The Malayan guards either side of the table leaned on their rifles and smoked cigarettes continually, to hide the smell.

When Piers made the boy strip, he covered his genitals protectively with both hands. The thin body was badly bruised.

But it was when he poured iced water from the carafe into the glass and sipped it, that the Communist broke down and cried, and told Piers about his unit and where it was located.

The man with the little hat kept his pistol pointed at Piers, watching expressionlessly as he undressed. Piers decided they did not want to shoot him. If they had, they would have done so already, to make things easier for themselves. A wounded man is little trouble.

'Lie on the floor face down.'

Piers obeyed. Who were they? It was clear they were not simply thieves – the whole thing was too complex for that. Besides, there was little of value in the apartment.

The alternative was that they had something to do with the leak in MAC's. But there was no way that Piers Roper could be traced to this address.

He must, then, have aroused someone's suspicions in his role as Mark Tabor. Had he made an error during his interview with Paul Anthony? He ran over the conversation, and could think of nothing. Even if he had, it would have been almost impossible for Anthony to trace this flat via Super-mail.

His trip to Connecticut had certainly been suspicious, but he did not think he had been seen, and he was sure he had not been followed back.

That left the detective in the mustard suit. Suppose the man knew Paul Anthony, well enough to breach professional ethics and tell him about 'Mark Tabor'; and suppose Anthony thought the appropriate reaction was to send a bunch of thugs to Mark Tabor's flat; and suppose the thugs had been readily procured and instantly briefed; it was still

unlikely they could have got to the apartment, found a key (there had been no sign of a break-in), and got inside in the time Piers took to walk there from the agency.

The analysis got him nowhere. He lay still, staring in close-up at the pattern of the carpet. There was nothing he could do, short of overpowering or distracting his armed captors, gaining the door with one bound, running out into the street and getting arrested for indecent exposure.

He heard the door. Two pairs of feet walked past his face. One belonged to the trendy man who had been sent out; the other wore canvas shoes with holes in the uppers.

'Hey, man, what kind of party is this?' It was a new voice, sounding young, a little effeminate, and frightened.

The fat man said: 'Never mind.'

'Okay, okay. What do I do?'

'Take off your clothes and jerk off.'

'That all?'

'Just do it, okay?'

There was a snapping of fingers. 'A hundred bucks, beforehand, the man said.'

Notes rustled.

A toe nudged Piers. 'Turn over.'

Piers rolled on to his back. The man taking off his thin, threadbare trousers was long-haired and very pale. Piers guessed he was a male prostitute, or a heroin addict, or both.

The fat man said: 'Kneel over him.'

One of the thugs said: 'He likes to be dominated.' The other laughed.

'Shut up,' the fat man said. He was breathing heavily. He said to the prostitute: 'Make sure it goes all over him.'

Piers suppressed his loathing, looked away from the prostitute's face, and tried to think. What were they trying to do? It was an odd approach to torture – and they had asked him no questions. Blackmail? There was no camera in evidence. Could they possibly be simply a gang of perverts? But their methods were too professional for that.

The fat man bent over Piers and squeezed his nose. Piers opened his mouth to breathe. The man dropped something in – it tasted like a lump of sugar. 'Swallow!' he said, still

holding Piers's nose. The sugar dissolved and Piers coughed and ingested.

Piers was suddenly very alert and detached. This thing had all the marks of a carefully planned operation. They had given him some kind of drug. He hoped it was only an hallucinogen.

The prostitute panted a few times, and Piers felt the slime land on his chest. Suddenly one of the thugs stepped forward. Piers saw with horror the knife in his hand. With a quick, practised movement he lifted the prostitute's chin, braced the man's back against his knee, and slit his throat. The fat man giggled insanely as hot blood gushed from the severed neck. 'Bolognese!' he screeched.

Piers tried not to vomit as the hideous body collapsed on to him. Everything appeared garishly bright: he closed his eyes to shut out the scene, but his hearing seemed to have become ultra-sharp.

He heard telephone sounds: the receiver clattering slightly as it was lifted from the cradle; the dial tone; a click as a button was punched. They were good noises, he thought; clear and bright. He wondered vaguely why he had wanted to get out of here. Lying still was comfortable, and listening was interesting. A voice said 'Police'. After a moment the same voice said: 'I think there's something going on in Mr. Roper's apartment, I mean I heard a lot of noise then a scream . . . what? He's in 31D, Talisman Tower.' The address sounded familiar, Piers thought. It was strange, the conversation. 'Me? No, sorry, I don't want to be involved.' Another clatter, as the handset was cradled. 'Okay, let's go. He's out.' Footsteps, now; a door noise; silence. It was puzzling. Piers opened his eyes.

The sight was a terrible shock. He pushed at the vile thing lying on top of him. It was heavy and clinging. He got out from under it and feebly wiped his hands on the carpet.

Sergeant Cox's voice came back to him, and he listened carefully. 'The effect of a hallucinogen depends on the prisoner's mood. If he is weak, or relaxed, it will make him helpless; if he is alert and strong-willed, he can resist the drug to a limited extent, making interrogation difficult.' Piers

knew that he was in some kind of trouble, and he had to get away fast. He stood up.

Clothes. He needed clothes, but he did not need to dress meticulously, as he usually did. He struggled into trousers, not bothering with the zip. Shoes, next – socks were inessential. Raincoat, button it up to the neck, so no one would see he had no shirt or tie. Did he need anything else? Money, the hell with it; passport was at the hotel; all right, get out.

There was nobody in the corridor, or in the lift. He started to enjoy the queer sensation of falling fast, then remembered: fight it, fight it. He got out into the street. Watch the traffic, he thought, don't get killed now, take great care.

He thought he knew the way to the hotel. If I can get to my room, I'll be all right, he said aloud. He remembered his room number and repeated it under his breath. He stopped at a kerb, looked left and right, and stepped out. A horn sounded, tyres squealed, someone screamed. Piers walked on, ignoring shouted recriminations. The car had seemed a long way off; he must have misjudged its speed. I should cross at the lights, where there is a crowd. But it was getting dark, and the different sorts of street light confused him. He felt sure that any car which hit him would bounce off, but it was always just as well to be cautious.

Suddenly he was outside the hotel. I can walk so fast, he thought, I might just go around the block for the hell of it. He went into the lobby and up to the desk. He could not remember his room number.

'Hello, Mr. Roper.' The desk clerk handed him a key. He turned and made for the lift. When he got in he had to look at his key to find out what floor he was on.

He made it to his room. Can't relax yet, just a few minutes. He dropped his clothes on the bathroom floor. Too easy to relax in the bath, use the shower. He stood under the water, watching it stream pinkly off his bloody body, and wondered whether it was his blood or someone else's. After a while he got out. There was blood on his clothes. He went to the wardrobe and took a polythene bag off a cleaned suit; stuffed the stained Mark Tabor clothes into the bag, and shut it inside his suitcase. He really ought to get rid of them. It

would look bad. But he would have to rest first, on the bed.

He lay on his back and began to study the delightful abstract pattern on the ceiling. After a while he decided it was better than anything by Pollock, and merited extended examination.

He remembered the whole thing in awful detail the moment he woke up. He ran through it in his mind, up to the point where the fat man said: 'Bolognese!' Piers shuddered.

It had clearly been a set up. The police had been meant to arrive and find Piers drugged and covered with the blood and semen of a male prostitute. It would have been an open-and-shut case, especially when they discovered he was a middle-aged English bachelor.

They had not reckoned, perhaps, on his having been trained to resist drugs during interrogation. Then another thought struck him: they may have believed it did not matter. It was possible they did not know about his Mark Tabor identity. If he had taken the flat in the name of Piers Roper, there would have been little point in his escaping. He clicked his fingers as he remembered: the fat man had referred to him as Roper on the phone.

He sneezed. He had lain down the previous night without drying himself. He got up now and ran a hot bath.

He examined the carpets and the bed for bloodstains, and found none. He got into the bath and scrubbed his skin until it hurt, as if by doing so he could deaden the memory. Then he washed his hair under the shower.

He was baffled. Who exactly they were, how they had got on to him, why they had thought it necessary to go to such extremes, he had no idea.

He sneezed several times as he dressed.

He put the polythene bag with the bloody clothes in it into his smaller suitcase. He contemplated wiping it over to erase fingerprints, but decided the exercise would be a waste of time. His prints were all over the Mark Tabor flat.

He went in a cab to Grand Central Station and put the

case in a left luggage locker. On the way back he bought a new suitcase.

He booked a flight to London and packed his things.

At the airport he bought a box of Kleenex. He seemed to have a cold.

As the plane took off he began to tremble uncontrollably. He wanted to weep. A stewardess looked at him sympathetically, and he realised she thought he was frightened of flying.

As soon as they were up he ordered a large whisky and got out his cigarettes. He could not work the lighter. The stewardess struck a match and leaned over him intimately. She had full breasts and a Colgate smile. There were clouds over the Atlantic coast.

The man had said: 'Bolognese!' The memory played in Piers's mind like a cracked record. When he dozed the murder came back to him in Technicolor, and he always awakened at that point in the dream.

There was something about the way the man had said it: not just the inconceivable twistedness of his tone of voice, but the pronunciation. He had said: 'Bol-on-yase,' with the final 'e' not quite silent. It was a little more correct than the usual American pronunciation. Piers felt it was important. Perhaps the man was a waiter. No, it was more than that.

He was rehearsing a conversation with Palmer. Piers was saying: 'If these are the methods the opposition is prepared to use, then I am just not in the game. I resign.'

It repeated in his head like a litany: 'I resign. I resign. I resign.' It got louder and louder, until the screech of the fat man saying 'Bolognese!' was almost inaudible.

Seven

The familiar air terminal at Heathrow gave Piers a feeling of coming down to earth, figuratively as well as literally. As the murder receded in time, he found he could contemplate it with increasing detachment. The sense of nightmare had gone.

The drug had been more persistent than he thought. Traces must have remained in his bloodstream for some hours after the initial high had gone. He wondered whether it had been LSD.

He really ought to send a telegram to Louise; he had not said goodbye. He found the cable office and put her name and the address of her Detroit home on a telegram blank. After two or three minutes' reflection he realised he did not know what to say to her. He tore up the blank. 'I've altered my mind,' he told the clerk.

He found his cases and automatically looked around for the bottle-green livery of a Greatlake chauffeur. But he had been out of touch for more than forty-eight hours: they had no way of knowing that he was on this flight. He picked up the luggage and went for a taxi.

The word 'Greatlake' caught his eye as he walked through the main concourse. He looked again and saw a newspaper placard which said: 'GREATLAKE: NO CRISIS - SHIPLEY.'

No crisis? What the hell was Shipley up to? Piers stood

still in the middle of the great hall, his brows drawn together in a deep frown. Lord Shipley was too experienced a company chairman to deny a crisis unless someone else had loudly alleged one.

Piers went to the stall, bought both evening newspapers, and found a seat.

The headline said :

CAR CHIEF SLAMS 'DOOM PROPHETS'

Piers read on :

LORD SHIPLEY today denied Greatlake Motors faced a financial crisis, and launched a strongly-worded counterblast against 'Prophets of doom' who criticise British industry.

He said : 'Greatlake (UK) is healthy and financially sound. Like all companies it is suffering from the nationwide liquidity famine and the government squeeze on profits, but there is no crisis.'

The statement followed reports that the giant car manufacturer is desperately short of cash since merchant bankers Smith, Harvery pulled out of a major scheme.

Lord Shipley, whose company employs close on 200,000 workers, added : 'This kind of attack on British manufacturers brings discredit to our industry among overseas customers and makes more difficult the job of putting Britain back on her feet.'

Shipley is understood to have been carpeted by the Premier following the Commons row about Greatlake.

The company's Managing Director, Mr. Piers Roper, was not available for comment as he was 'somewhere in the USA,' a spokesman said this afternoon.

Piers folded the newspaper, put it in his briefcase, and lit a cigarette. When he had smoked it he went to the British Airways desk and booked a flight to Birmingham.

It was after 2 a.m. when he paid off the taxi outside the gate of the Greatlake factory. He rang the night bell at the lodge, feeling like the weary traveller outside the Gothic mansion in a horror story. The vertical lines of the factory architec-

ture looked sinister enough, lit from below by powerful spotlights which threw deep shadows.

A uniformed watchman came out of the gatehouse and shone a torch into Piers's face. The beam dropped almost immediately. 'Mr. Roper, sir, I'm sorry – just one moment, sir.' The man fumbled with keys.

He opened the gate, let Piers in, and closed it again.

Piers said: 'I want to get into the Public Relations department, then my own office. You'd better unlock for me.'

'Yes, sir. I am supposed to report anything out of the ordinary, sir. Will you come in the guardhouse for a minute?'

'Very well.'

Inside the little building the watchman picked up an internal phone. He dialled two digits. 'Jack? Harold speaking. Mr. Roper has just arrived, and he would like me to take him in the management building and unlock a couple of doors – okay?' There was a pause. 'Righty-ho, then. Bye.' He looked at Piers. 'He's sending somebody down from the closed-circuit room to replace me. He asked us to wait until the bloke arrives – I hope you don't mind too much.'

'No.' Piers found it infuriating. He lit a cigarette and looked around the room. The one chair was battered, but looked comfortable. A mug containing coffee dregs was on the floor, next to a magazine called *Tales of the Supernatural*. It was hot and stuffy.

The silence dragged. 'Terrible weather,' the watchman said.

'I wouldn't know – I've been in the United States. Got back tonight.'

'It's poured for a week. Terrible.'

'Oh.'

'All this in the papers – is that what's brought you back?'

'I was due back anyway.'

'Oh, I thought it might have been all this in the papers.'

'No.' Piers decided that the Midlands accent of the guard made the conversation even more tedious.

Boots clattered on the drive, and after a minute a second watchman came in. He saluted Piers, laid his truncheon on the table, and looked at his colleague. 'Okay, Harold.'

'Righty ho, then.' Harold held the door for Piers.

The cold night air was welcome. They exhaled thick grey plumes as they walked up the long drive to the office block. At the main door Harold fumbled with his keys again. Piers controlled an ill-tempered urge to tell the man to hurry.

The open-plan Public Relations office was in a mess. The staff had apparently stayed late that night: there was crockery on the desks, amid piles of newspapers and screwed-up Greatlake press release paper.

Piers said: 'Thank you, Harold. If you'd like to go and open my office, you can return to your post.'

'Righty ho, then. If there's anything you want, dial 21 on the grey phone to get Mr. Bartlett, that's Jack.'

'Thank you.' Piers turned his back.

There was a rack of newspaper files along one wall, under a notice saying: 'File copies. Do not cut.' Piers lifted one off the rack, dumped it on a desk, sat down, lit a cigarette, and started to read.

He sat in his own office two hours later and watched through the window as the line of light grey on the horizon began to encroach upon the rest of the sky.

He felt slightly ill. It was almost twelve hours since he had eaten, and he had been chain-smoking all night.

He picked up his grey phone and dialled 21. 'This is Roper.'

'Good morning, Mr. Roper, this is Jack Bartlett speaking. Can I help you?'

'What do you chaps do about breakfast?'

'We've got a little kitchen here, sir, and the lads come in one by one and make theirselves something. Would you like anything?'

'If you could produce bacon and eggs and a cup of tea or coffee, it would be very welcome.'

'Right you are, sir, we'll see what we can do.'

'Thank you.' Piers put the phone down. He looked again at the four newspaper articles he had cut from the files in the Public Relations office. The first was four days old, which meant it had been published the day he had gone to Con-

necticut to watch Paul Anthony's home.

It was under the byline of an industrial correspondent. Piers read it again.

THE DEPARTMENT of Health and Social Security has finally bowed to pressure from social workers and abandoned the three-wheel carriages traditionally supplied to invalids, I can exclusively reveal today.

Secretary of State Mr. Albert Teacher will shortly announce that a specially-adapted Greatlake Squire will replace the obsolete carriage.

A massive Government order for the new cars has helped Greatlake finance new plant and equipment for production of the special cars.

The modified Squire, costing only £90 more than a three-wheeler, goes into production within three months. It is not known where the work will be done, but extensive retooling is being carried out at the old Holmes motorcycle factory in Creighton.

The Department's exclusive deal with Greatlake is certain to cause controversy. All the larger motor manufacturers have had contingency plans for producing cars for invalids since reports three years ago which attacked three-wheelers as unsafe, inconvenient and expensive.

Opposition Industry spokesman Mr. David Butter said: 'The Government has taken this step totally without consultation.

'Other motor companies will want to know why they were not invited to tender for the contract.

'And the British voter will ask why the order went to an American-owned company.'

A spokesman for Greatlake (UK) Motors Ltd. declined to comment.

The story seemed at first glance to have emanated from the MP quoted towards the end. He certainly had a good motive for leaking it. But there was too much accurate information for it to be based on a careless slip. Someone in

the company had given out good, hard information. It could not have been the PR Department, for they had refused to comment – quite rightly. Besides, it was next to impossible that they should have done anything so ham-fisted. The announcement of the deal would have to come from the Government, and be presented in a way which would detract attention from its controversial aspects. Otherwise – well, Piers's second cutting showed what damage a leak could do.

It was a short Parliamentary report from the following day's edition of a quality newspaper.

Mr. Alfred Teacher yesterday in the Commons denied that the Government is to scrap the controversial three-wheeled invalid carriage.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Security was answering a question by Mr. David Butter, M.P. for Benchfieldham.

In a written reply, Mr. Teacher said: 'The supply of special vehicles to handicapped persons is a policy kept more or less constantly under review, but there are no plans to discontinue the vehicles.

'The Department has no contract with Greatlake Motors for specially-adapted motor vehicles, and no such arrangement is presently contemplated.'

The politician had been left with no alternative, of course. Because of the way the story had emerged, the deal smacked of secrecy and favouritism. There was indeed no formal contract, so Teacher had seen an easy escape route. It left his colleague at the DTI with the problem of what to do about the Holmes motorcycle factory; but Teacher would have been a saint to endanger his political career for that.

The whole sky was now a luminescent shade of pearl. Piers read the third cutting, from the City page of a popular daily.

Greatlake Motors is widely rumoured to be considering a rights issue. My advice to them is – don't. And if they do, I shall not recommend investors to take the shares up.

The company is badly strapped for cash. Like the rest of the car industry, it had been hit by declining sales at a time when heavy investment is overdue.

I understand Greatlake's clearing bank, the Northern, has set a ceiling on the company's ascending overdraft.

But the killing blow was struck by the Government's denial of orders for the projected invalid car. Greatlake had moved ahead too fast here, buying plant and retooling before the deal was finalised.

When the DHSS pulled out, so did merchant bankers Smith, Harvery, leaving Greatlake with half a factory and no money – hence the reported foray into the stock market.

Rights issues, I believe, are a sound financial tool for an expanding company needing investment, but not for a rescue operation. They are fine for stoking up the ship's boilers, but no good for lifeboats.

Piers thought a little longer about that one. No rights issue had been contemplated when he left; and four days was too short to mount one. That part of the report was a complete fiction, then: a red herring. The real purpose of the story was to reveal the news about the Northern Bank's ceiling and Smith, Harvery withdrawing support.

If true – and both items seemed likely – then this story, too, had come from within the company. It was just possible that one or other of the banks had been indiscreet or careless – but not both.

The fourth cutting was from the paper Piers had bought at Heathrow. While he was re-reading it, a security guard knocked and entered his office, carrying a scratched plastic tray.

'Breakfast, Mr. Roper?'

Piers cleared a space in front of him. 'Splendid, thank you.' He gave the man a five-pound note. 'Put that in the kitty.'

'Very kind, sir.' The guard went out.

The rasher of bacon and the fried egg were very greasy, but for once Piers did not mind. He was rarely this hungry. He forced himself to drink the cooling instant coffee.

When he had finished he put the tray out of sight in his secretary's office, and went into his bathroom to clean his teeth.

He opened his office window, breathed the sweet-tasting morning air, and broke the cellophane on a fresh packet of Senior Service. It was time to find out what was going on.

He found a list of home numbers of executives and sat in front of the phone with a new cigarette in his hand.

First he dialled Don Kendell.

The voice that answered was sleepy and irritated. 'Yes, who is it?'

'Roper. Is that Kendell?'

'Sweet Jesus, I've been trying to get you for days! What -'

Piers cut in. 'Never mind all that. I have a question to ask you. If you're less than totally candid with me, I will destroy your career. I'm sorry to be offensive, but I have no time for niceties.'

The PR man seemed to have recovered his composure. 'I understand.'

'Thank you. Did Greatlake's publicity office have anything to do with the leaking of the invalid carriage deal?'

'Good God, no.' He paused, and the tone of outrage left his voice completely. 'It was the first thing I checked, of course. Some youngster might have gone out on a limb in an attempt to prove himself - but no. Nothing about the deal has ever gone out from my department.'

'I'm satisfied. Goodbye.' Piers pressed the cradle and dialled again. This time the sleepy voice was that of William Winter, the company secretary.

'Good morning, Willie.'

'Roper?'

'Yes.'

'My God, where have you been? All hell's let loose.'

'I had a couple of days' break. I got in last night, to find - as you say - all hell let loose. Tell me what happened.'

'Well, young Clayton went ahead with the invalid car project, as you instructed him, and somehow the news leaked out. The Secretary of State ran scared, and Smith, Harvery got cold feet. That's about it. You can imagine the consequences.'

'Clayton went ahead with it? On whose authority?'

'Yours. You briefed him at that meeting before you went away – well before.'

Piers's voice rose in pitch. 'Willie, you were *there* – I didn't tell him to go ahead.'

'You kept him there afterwards – I imagined that was when . . . are you telling me you didn't give him authority?'

'Of course I didn't. All I had was a verbal agreement with a civil servant. It would have been insane – it was. Willie, what does this look like to you?'

'A palace revolt?'

'I seem to have got back just in time.'

'I hope so, Roper. Where are you now?'

'At the works. I've been here all night. Let me know when you arrive.'

'Certainly. Goodbye.'

Piers put the phone down and rubbed his eyes. They felt gritty. He had a headache. There was one call he needed to make, then he could snatch a few hours' sleep. He dialled, and listened.

It was answered quickly. 'Clayton here.'

'Roper. I'm at the works. I want to see you in my office here at nine o'clock.'

'Certainly.' Was there a tremor in the voice? 'Nine o'clock. I'll be there.'

Piers hung up. Clayton had been awake already – he must be an early riser. Damn the boy. He was Palmer's man, like Piers; and he was doing what Piers had done when *he* came to Greatlake – trying to take over. Palmer could not have briefed him. Now Piers would have to destroy him.

It would not be difficult. A project like the retooling at Creighton could not possibly go ahead without some written instruction; and Piers had issued none. The attempted coup was clumsy.

Piers felt confident now. It would not be difficult, just tire-

some. He closed the window, removed his jacket, and settled in an armchair. After a minute he closed his eyes.

'Oh, my word!'

The feminine squeal penetrated Piers' deep sleep. He surfaced slowly and opened his eyes. Audrey stood in front of him.

He sat upright. 'I'm sorry if I scared you.'

She blushed. 'It was just that I thought you were in America.' Her voice sounded a little admonitory, as if she felt he ought to be there.

Piers looked at his watch. It was almost ten o'clock. 'Hasn't Mr. Clayton been up?'

'No. Shall I get him on the line for you?'

'Yes. No, get me some coffee. I'll dial him.'

He had the slightly panicky feeling he associated with sleeping during the day; a sense that he had lost a few hours of his life. He picked up the internal phone and got Clayton's secretary.

She said: 'I'm sorry, Mr. Clayton isn't here. Can I help you?'

'This is Roper. He was supposed to see me at nine. Where is he?'

'Well, I can't understand that, Mr. Roper. He's not expected today. He's gone to London.'

'What on earth for?'

'The board meeting.'

For a moment Piers was frozen still. The girl said: 'Are you there?' He put the phone down slowly.

'Audrey?'

She came in. 'Yes?'

'Did you know there was a board meeting today?'

She was shocked. 'There can't be! I would have been notified, even though you were away. It's always -'

He cut her off with a gesture. 'You weren't meant to know, this time,' he said wearily. 'Get me a car, quickly. Then get a message to Lord Shipley, telling him I'll be at the board. He'll have to delay it.' He put on his jacket and tightened his tie. His throat was rough with bristles. He

rubbed his cheek. 'They'll have to put up with my appearance,' he murmured. —

He stopped for petrol in the Edgware Road less than two hours later. While the attendant was filling the tank, he phoned Audrey.

'You got the message through?' he asked.

'I'm afraid not. Mr. Clayton had given instructions that there were to be no calls and no messages while the board was sitting.'

Piers dropped the phone and ran to the car.

Lord Shipley sat alone at the head of the long mahogany table, staring at the portrait of his grandfather, Peter Holmes, the inventor of rack-and-pinion steering. He turned his head slowly to look at Piers.

'Ah,' he said heavily. '*Lupus in fabula.*'

Piers walked the length of the room. The lights were off, and the grey daylight through the windows left the corners in darkness. Shipley's ageing face had a crumpled look, like a used pillow. Only the small blue eyes were bright.

Piers said: 'Well?'

Shipley's gaze returned to the painting. 'I got your message after the meeting, so I waited.'

'Thank you.' Piers nodded. He was breathless and unshaven, and he had been wearing the same shirt for twenty-four hours. He wished he could play the familiar role of the cool, crisp operator, but there was no time left for finesse. He said: 'I did not give Clayton authority to start the re-tooling at Creighton.'

Shipley nodded slowly, without looking away from the portrait.

Piers went on: 'He knew today that I was back in the country. I rang him at five-thirty. He said he would be in my office at nine. He didn't mention the board.'

Shipley looked at him blankly.

Piers frowned. 'You do believe me.'

'It makes not one whit difference,' the Chairman said at

last. 'What matters is that the City requires a sacrificial lamb. We must make propitiation for our sins.'

Anger and frustration built up in Piers. He gripped the back of a chair. 'Damn it, Shipley, Clayton leaked those stories to the press. You've seen coups before now – surely you can recognise this one?'

'Of course it's a coup, Piers. And I fear it's a successful one.'

'Why?'

'The board made Clayton Acting Managing Director in your absence.'

'I'm no longer absent.'

'Don't be a fool.' Shipley's voice lost its habitual languor, and for the first time he showed signs of being animated. 'They've backed Clayton. They can't lose face by taking your side now.'

Piers pulled out a chair and sat down. Suddenly he realised he had been expertly outmanoeuvred. He lit a cigarette. He felt a curious sense of release. 'I shall resign, of course.'

Shipley smiled slightly. 'I'll announce it immediately. The sooner the better in these matters.'

Now that it had happened, Piers realised what a small thing it was. He relaxed physically, and the accumulated exhaustion of the past twenty-four hours caught up with him. He closed his eyes. 'I've been thinking of opening a gallery,' he said.

'My dear chap!' Shipley was beaming, Piers saw as he opened his eyes. 'What a splendid idea! I shall be your first patron.'

The rather hysterical euphoria was dissipated by the drive back to the Midlands. Losing his job meant nothing financially; for some time now he had had more money than he needed. But he had wanted to go proudly; there was something terribly humiliating about getting the sack. He was branded a failure, and he found it awfully depressing.

There was Palmer, too. His resignation from that organisation would now be a matter of obligation rather than choice.

What was left? He would, he supposed, find his new career; whether it was art or something else. Forty-five was a good age at which to take a step sideways. It was the time when the bright young men found you most vulnerable. If I had gone on, Piers thought, how long would it have been before another Clayton began sharpening his knife? Or before I got an ulcer?

But what was left?

There was Louise.

It had been a strange affair, he reflected as he turned off the motorway. Both had concealed or suppressed their feelings until almost too late. He had been besotted; how much of that had been loneliness and boredom? He had hardly thought of her for four days. But perhaps there was good reason for that.

And her; how much of her feeling for him was the romance implicit in the master servant relationship?

Never mind; he could go back to the States now, and find out. He had nothing to do but find contentment. As he drove down the track to the cottage, he pictured her throwing back her head to laugh, revealing the beautiful line of her throat.

There was another car outside the cottage. As Piers pulled up, a small figure got out and came to his door.

He wound his window down. It was a woman. She handed him something. 'A telegram came for you while I was waiting,' she said. The voice was familiar.

He turned on his interior light and looked at her face.

He said: 'Good Lord, what are you doing here, Anne?'

Eight

Piers's resilience had all been used up. He found it impossible to adjust to Anne's surprise appearance. He could not summon up the energy to be embarrassed, or charming, or brusque. He moved about the cottage as if she were not there; turning on lights, firing the boiler for warmth, opening a window. The place had the strange appearance of a home returned to after a holiday: everything looked a little unfamiliar. He gave each of his paintings an affectionate glance, touching a canvas here, straightening a frame there. Their charm seemed to be renewed by absence. In the drawing room he stopped before the Derain still life, the first picture he had bought for the cottage. In a strange way the painting had led him to the weakness in Greatlake's management which had eventually brought about the American takeover. He had bought it from Sir Trevor Hollowood, the Financial Director who had lost his job in the shakeout which gave Piers the Managing Directorship. What was Hollowood doing now? After a battle, one always had one's eye on the victors.

He sat down and looked at Anne. She had helped herself to a drink. He said: 'Where do the losers go?'

She smiled. 'Home?'

His chain of thought was broken. He looked at his watch. 'I'll get out of these clothes, as soon as the water heats.' He

wanted a drink. He looked at Anne, wondering whether to ask her to get it; then decided she might resent the request. He sighed: that was the trouble with Anne. She made him walk on eggshells.

She got up and went to the cabinet. 'What would you like?'

'God, you always could read my mind. I'd like some whisky.' He watched her mix it with water in equal quantities. She remembered.

'Thank you,' he said as she handed him a squat glass. 'How did you know I'd been sacked?'

'I heard about it on the radio.'

'Good Lord. Shipley didn't lose any time.'

'What happened?'

He swallowed whisky and waited a moment for the start of the glow. 'An error of judgement on my part,' he said. 'I should have spent much longer consolidating my position before going to America. I ought to have developed allies on the board, bound some executives to me personally, organised private sources of information. But I didn't; and while my back was turned, someone slid a knife in.'

Anne would not be satisfied with that. 'How was it done?'

Piers sat back. The liquor was getting to his bloodstream, easing the stiffness in his muscles. 'It's not complicated. One of my whizz-kids jumped the gun on a new project before I'd finalised the deal. He spent money, then leaked the story to a newspaper. The government got the wind up and backed out, taking a merchant bank with them. The whizz-kid managed to persuade the board that it was all my fault before I got a chance to nail him to the wall.'

'It's so unjust!' Anne looked quite angry.

'Well, if Clayton can outmanoeuvre me in internal politics, he's probably a better chief executive. There's a certain medieval logic about the whole thing.'

'It's a brutal sort of logic.'

'Logic often is rather brutal.' Piers was thinking: Why should she care? And what is she doing here, anyway? Emotion was returning to him like the feeling rushing into an arm that had been slept upon. She had a remarkable ability to read his mood: he wanted time to decide how he

felt. He said: 'I must bath. Please make yourself at home.' He went out quickly, before she could react to the phrase 'at home' – it had been ill-chosen.

As he shaved his face he thought again: Why did she come? When he had asked, outside the cottage, what she was doing here, she had said: 'what kind of welcome is that?' Since then she had just sat around, matching his mood with a blankness of her own. He had not offered her dinner, yet she showed no inclination to leave. Did she plan to stay the night? Piers had not even kissed her hello. He was not sure he wanted to make love to her: Louise was vibrant in his mind.

He washed his face and got into the bath. Lord, he was tired of calculating probabilities, figuring angles, trying to predict the future. Perhaps he was not so much tired, as bored. The habit of foresight died hard. What did it matter, now? He would let things happen. He closed his eyes.

He woke with a start. The water had become tepid as he dozed. He dried himself briskly and went into the bedroom to dress.

It was the room he had furnished for her. He could not help thinking about what it would be like to fuck her again, under that pretty quilt. Damn. He probably had no choice in the matter: she was a woman who got exactly what she wanted.

He stared at his naked body in the long mirror. He was tall and thin, with little hair on his body. Only a hint of hardness about his arms and legs, and the fact that he had the flat belly of a teenager, indicated that he was fitter than other men of his age. His skin was white: he had neither the patience nor the vanity to sit in the sun and acquire a tan. Perhaps he would, now.

He took a white shirt from the wardrobe. Anne's voice came from the doorway. 'Wear a red one.' He looked at her, startled. She was wearing an apron, and studying his body without embarrassment. 'I'm grilling a couple of steaks I found in the freezer,' she said. 'They're nearly ready.' She went away.

The moment of intimacy had been perfectly natural, as if there had been no break in their relationship. It would, it

seemed, be possible to pick up the threads where they had been left so many months ago. Which did not help Piers decide whether he wanted to.

He buttoned his shirt, realising that he had unconsciously chosen a red one. Well, she could make of it what she would.

He finished dressing and went into the kitchen. Anne had laid cutlery on the pine table. She looked very domestic. She said: 'I couldn't find any vegetables.'

Piers sat down. 'No civilised man eats frozen vegetables.'

'Never mind, the steaks are big enough.' She put a plate in front of him. 'I took the liberty of opening a bottle of wine.'

They began to eat. The meat was a little overdone – Anne was not as good a cook as Piers. He swallowed some claret to improve the taste. After a few minutes he said: 'Tell me about Bernard Fletcher.'

She blushed. 'I'm not proud of the way I sprung him on you.'

'It was a coincidence.'

'I might have warned you. I don't know why . . . it was ludicrous. So melodramatic.'

'What is he?'

'A stage manager.' She laughed, deprecatingly. 'Appropriate, isn't it.'

'Do you love him?'

'He's unconventional, and creative, and mild. He takes his job seriously, but it doesn't dominate his life.'

Piers thought: You mean his personality is as different from mine as could be. He said: 'But you don't love him.'

'I haven't seen him for some time.'

Piers nodded silently. He thought he knew what had happened; but he would let her tell him in her own time.

They finished the meal and moved to the drawing room. Piers poured Southern Comfort for Anne and a very large Courvoisier for himself. She sat beside him on the sofa.

The silence lengthened until it became uncomfortable. Eventually Piers said: 'Why did you come here?'

She looked straight ahead instead of at him. 'The short answer to that is, I still love you.'

He stared at her. 'And the long answer?'

'I might have known it wouldn't faze you.' She looked at him with a smile, then looked away again. She spoke slowly, as if she were choosing her words: 'I thought I was in love with Bernie. He was my kind of man: enlightened, considerate, warm, human. I enjoyed talking to him, we went to the theatre, I liked his friends. I thought I might live with him. We went to bed. He was gentle, and sophisticated, and strong, and all night I kept wishing he were you.'

'There were some others. Good men, at first; and then just anybody. It was always the same. The reason wasn't physical: some of them had thin, hard bodies like yours, some were handsome, some were cruel, like you.' She broke off to light a cigarette. Piers said nothing. She inhaled deeply. He saw that her hands were unsteady. 'I think I know, now. When we make love, you're so . . . glad. Christ, it sounds a small thing.'

She dragged hard on the cigarette. 'I wanted you. But I knew it wouldn't work. You have your emotions too well controlled. Any woman would take second place in your life, unless she was prepared to contest Greatlake. You were a success man: nothing was more important than winning, not even me. I couldn't bear that. Being so much in love with you made it worse, not better. And you could never love the woman who made you put your job second.'

'So you see why I came here. Someone else fought that battle for me. Your job is dead, leaving you a widower.' She finished the cigarette and put it out. 'Does that make any sense?'

'Yes.' Piers did not know what else to say, so he said nothing. He laid back his head and closed his eyes, sorting out his feelings. He was uncomfortable with such emotional nakedness. He also felt flattered, and recognised that as a disgracefully egocentric reaction. And he was confused. For she had made him a proposal; of that there was no doubt. He had to tell her what he wanted. The ball was in his court.

He opened his eyes and saw her gazing at his face. 'I don't know what to say,' he said. He touched her hand to take away the coldness of his words.

She said: 'There's someone else, isn't there?'

He nodded. 'In America. But it was so quick . . .'

She squeezed his hand, hard. 'Don't make a decision, Piers.'

He stared at her. The pleading note was radically uncharacteristic. What had happened to her? 'It hasn't been the same with me as it has with you. I . . . it worked. She was helping me forget, slowly. But . . . ' He did not know how to say things like this.

'Let me stay with you. Sleep with me.' She got up and walked across the room. 'Christ, why am I doing this to myself?' She turned around. 'I don't want any promises - I just want you, if only for a night.'

Piers stood up and took her hands. 'I want you, too,' he smiled. 'Come to bed.' He held her hand as he took her into the bedroom. 'Perhaps we'll spend a few days together, and find out how we feel. We needn't leave the cottage.' He smiled again and began to undress. 'I don't know what we'll eat.'

She stepped out of her dress. 'We'll manage,' she said gaily. 'There's food in the freezer, and some spaghetti. We can live on spaghetti bolognese. It's one of the few things I can cook. *What on earth is wrong?*'

He stood in his underwear, staring at her. His face was ghastly, and his eyes were wild.

'Piers, you look terrified. For God's sake, what is it?'

He sat down heavily on the edge of the bed and buried his face in his hands. She finished taking off her bra, then knelt in front of him. 'Can you tell me?'

He looked at her. 'It happened in New York.' His voice was dull, flat. 'They wanted to discredit me. They brought a poor homosexual off the street, set things up so it looked as if we'd been having an orgy, then murdered him. They cut his throat, Anne, in front of me. God, he bled so much.' Piers squeezed his eyes shut, as if trying not to see the memory. 'One of them seemed to enjoy it. He said "Bolognese" when the queer died.' He sighed heavily. 'They gave me some drug, then called the police. I got away - the flat was in a false name . . . I'd forgotten about it for a few hours. Now you've brought it back.'

'Jesus Christ.' She stared at him, aghast. 'Piers - who are they?'

'God knows. If I knew - no, it's all over. I'm out of it.'

'Out of what? Why should they – But why did you take a flat in a false name?'

'I suppose I can tell you now. My cover's blown, as they say. I'm an industrial spy, Anne. I have been for fifteen years. When MAC's, the Americans, took over English Motors, they gave my boss a contract for information from Holmes Motors, as it then was. That was when I got myself employed by Holmes.

'Now you know the real reason I couldn't leave Holmes when it became Greatlake. The Managing Directorship was a great coup – I couldn't throw it away without letting my real masters down.'

She stood up. 'Come to bed.'

They got under the quilt, and he held her tightly. 'So you see, I've lost two jobs. My usefulness as a spy is at an end – somebody has found me out. I'm not sorry.' He laughed, but there was a note of hysteria underneath. 'These Americans play too rough for me.' He began to weep.

Anne cradled his head against her breasts until he cried himself to sleep.

The telephone awakened them. Piers opened his eyes, squinted against the sunshine from the window, and picked up the receiver. 'Roper.'

'Palmer.'

Piers closed his eyes and lay back on the pillow. 'Yes?'

'Didn't you get my cable?'

'Oh! I didn't open it.'

There was a soft curse at the other end. 'What the hell is going on?'

'Everyone asks me the same questions,' Piers said. 'It's all over, Henry. I got nowhere in the States, and at the end of it someone tried to frame me for murder.'

'Is that why you resigned from Greatlake?'

'No, Clayton is the cause of that. He's a good operator – he killed the king. You should have briefed him.'

'Who?'

'Your new man, Clayton.'

'Piers, Clayton's not my man. Gorse is.'

Piers sat upright, his eyes wide open. 'Then who the hell is Clayton working for?'

'I think I owe it to him, Anne,' said Piers. They were drinking coffee and smoking the first cigarette of the day, in the sunlit kitchen. They were both thinking about the previous night, and the way they had bared their souls to each other in turn; but neither mentioned it. Piers was going to London.

'If it's all over, there's nothing to discuss,' she said.

'I agree, but he doesn't.'

'You don't work for him any more. Do what you like.'

'It isn't that sort of relationship. After fifteen years, don't you think he has the right to ask for a report and a personal resignation?'

She shrugged. 'You must do as you think best.'

He stood up. She looked him up and down, taking in the business suit, white shirt, and black tie. 'You've got your whizz-kid uniform on.'

'A case of mutton dressed as sheep.'

'I hope it is,' she muttered.

He kissed her lips. 'I will be back tonight. Don't go away.'

Palmer was at King's Cross in person to meet Roper from the train. They shook hands at the ticket barrier, a little formally; there was a certain tension between them. Palmer had a car and a driver waiting.

He gave the chauffeur an address which was unfamiliar to Piers.

'Where are we going?' Piers asked.

'My flat - we might as well be comfortable.'

Piers lit a cigarette. 'You've probably decided that secrecy no longer serves any purpose.'

'Certainly you can no longer operate as a clandestine agent. Have you had lunch?'

'On the train.'

'Good. We can get down to business right away.'

'There's not a lot to discuss, Henry.'

'You won't mind if I reserve judgement on that.'

Piers inclined his head in agreement. They did not speak for the rest of the journey.

Palmer's home was in a Kensington back street, and Piers was secretly amused that the address was a little less grand than his own in Belgravia. The apartment door was opened by a young man in jeans and T-shirt. Palmer said to him: 'Peter, this is Piers Roper.'

Piers looked around. It was the first time he had been to Palmer's home. He had always thought of his boss as a big, powerful man with a considerable intellect and a grey personality. The flat belied that picture. It was exquisitely decorated in bright colours, with a lot of unusual fabrics.

Peter brought whisky, glasses, and a jug of water as the two men sat down. Piers wondered just who or what he was: he seemed to be playing the role of a rather hip butler.

He looked at Palmer's bookshelf: paperback bestsellers, heavy volumes on accountancy and business practice, Kerouac, Genet, Nietzsche, Plato. On one wall there was a large picture of naked men in a changing-room. Piers cast about in his mind for the name of the painter: a modern realist, not his taste.

Peter said: 'I'll leave you to it.' He touched Palmer's shoulder as he left, and a quick glance passed between them. Piers realised with a sense of shock that it was obvious what role the young man played: he was Palmer's lover. It came as a great revelation. He had always felt that there was something missing in his image of Palmer; some facet of personality that the man kept secret. He tried to imagine him displaying attitudes of tenderness, and found the exercise embarrassing.

Palmer poured drinks and handed one to Piers; then he loosened his collar, sat back, and said: 'You've got the floor.'

Piers spoke slowly and concisely; ordering his thoughts in clear sequence; selecting economical turns of phrase. He recapitulated the way the information leak from MAC's had been traced through the personnel agency in Piccadilly and the New Bank of Chicago; then told how he had followed the lead by going to see Paul Anthony, key executive at the bank. He explained the creation of Mark Tabor: the bank accounts, the mailing addresses, the flat, the anonymous

clothes. He related the surveillance on Paul Anthony's house, and the burglary; and produced the little book of phone numbers he had stolen. He described his visit to the detective agency, and the attempt to frame him for murder which had followed. Finally he detailed the coup which had displaced him from the Managing Directorship of Greatlake (UK).

Palmer listened concentratedly, keeping the cigarettes and whisky close to Piers's hand, and smiling occasionally at characteristic expressions. A corner of Piers's mind worried about the other man's solicitude. Never before had he been bothered by the kind of affection he and Palmer had for each other; and logically it should not cause him anxiety now. But it did.

When he finished speaking, Palmer stayed silent and thoughtful for some time. At one point he looked straight at Piers and said: 'I'm sorry, very sorry.' Later he said: 'What kind of people are they?'

Eventually he became brisk again, as if he had re-run the monologue in his mind and come to the end. 'It's possible that Paul Anthony knew all along that you were Roper. He could then have traced you to the flat, just about.'

Piers nodded agreement.

'It would follow that you were blown at this end, in England. The snag with that is that if Anthony had traced the flat via the Mark Tabor identity, he would have known about the care with which the identity was set up, and the fact that the flat could not be connected with Piers Roper. But whoever arranged the frame-up cannot have known that fact; for it was the fatal flaw in the operation. Conclusion: you were fingered by someone who knew that Piers Roper might be found at the flat, but did not know about Mark Tabor.'

Piers shifted in his chair. 'I admire the analysis, but it doesn't help.'

'What was Paul Anthony's attitude to you?'

Piers shrugged. 'Much what you would expect.' He frowned. 'There was something a little odd. At the end, he said "You come back, y'hear?" It didn't ring true.'

'It's a southern expression, I think,' Palmer mused. 'I can't

see the significance. Is he a southerner?’

‘Who knows? I doubt it; but then I don’t suppose they all wear ten-gallon hats. Perhaps he wanted me to think he was a southerner.’

‘Let’s file that and move on,’ Palmer said. ‘Look at the broad picture: our client is in trouble. MAC’s has suffered major blows on three fronts since we took on their contract. First, there was the merger between two of their components suppliers resulting in a crippling price increase. Then a flood of secret information started – the leak we’ve been trying, with spectacularly little success, to trace. Thirdly, they had had a major strike.’

He stood and began to pace up and down the Persian carpet, his totally bald head showing. ‘We’ve been asking who is behind the leak. Suppose we broaden our field of inquiry. Who was behind the merger? Who was behind the strike?’

‘If you’re driving at something, I’m missing the point,’ Piers said.

‘Listen, Piers. *What if the three questions have the same answer?*’

Piers stared at Palmer. ‘It would be a bear raid. Good Lord!’ There was a silence while both men rolled out the implications in their minds.

Then they spoke at once. ‘What we need to know –’ They stopped, and laughed. Palmer finished: ‘– is what’s been happening to MAC’s shares.’ He fetched the phone and put it on the table beside the whisky. ‘There’s a broker in New York I’ve done some work for.’ He took a large blue address book from a shelf and sat down with it. When he had the number he picked up the phone. ‘It’s just after nine o’clock there. Half London rings New York at this time of day. Still, we might be lucky.’

As he dialled, Piers reflected. If the same people were behind all MAC’s troubles, their object was certainly to bring down the price of the shares and buy them cheap. That in itself was probably just a step on the way to control of the company. Plenty of American businessmen had the motive – but how many had the power to create mergers, cause information leaks, and foment industrial strife?

There was another angle. It was at least possible that those same people had arranged the murder at the Mark Tabor flat. But could there be *anyone* who was both powerful enough, and sufficiently unscrupulous? Remembering Watergate, Piers briefly considered the White House; then dismissed it for lack of motive.

Palmer was speaking into the phone. 'George? Henry Palmer, in London. Very well, thank you. Listen, I need some information which you've probably got in that filing cabinet you call a brain. What's been happening to MAC's shares in the last few months?' There was a pause. 'I see. Yes . . . Much trading? . . . Yes. My dear chap, you're an encyclopaedia. One more thing, I'm sending one of my chaps across tonight. Will you let him buy you lunch? Excellent. Many thanks . . . Goodbye, George.'

He put the phone down. 'They've been falling slowly, but steadily. Every time they look like flattening out, there's a new crisis. There hasn't been much trading, but a little more than he would have expected.'

'Hm. They're doing it very discreetly,' Piers said. 'You should have asked him to make some more inquiries.'

Palmer smiled. 'Not necessarily. After a phone call like that, he's bound to do some snuffling around Wall Street.'

'We still haven't got a lead. The only way to find out who's doing all this is to wait and see who ends up controlling MAC's.'

'We have one possibility.' Palmer picked up the little book of phone numbers from Paul Anthony's home. 'The one useful thing you did over there was to steal this.'

'Not so. It contains only Christian names. Sometimes just one initial.'

'We might compare the numbers in here with a list of the phone numbers of senior executives at MAC's.'

Piers raised his eyebrows. 'Why didn't I think of that?'

'Because you haven't got the list.'

'You have?'

Palmer went to his bookcase. 'I demand this kind of unclassified information as a condition of working for a client.' He brought a small ring-binder file back to the chair. 'Your list is shorter, so I suggest you call out each number

in that and let me search for it in here.'

Twenty minutes later Piers read: 'Milt. 2930987.'

Palmer ran his finger down the page. 'Here it is! Milton Kane, executive vice-president in charge of advertising.'

'Jesus, we've got the bastard,' Piers breathed.

Palmer picked up the phone. 'Let's get you on a plane.'

Nine

On the flight Piers tried to read *The Economist*, but was unable to concentrate. He hailed the stewardess and asked for a bottle of champagne.

They were high over the Atlantic. There was no cloud. A small white smear on the surface of the ocean was the only moving object in sight: Piers guessed it was a passenger liner, from its colour. That is the way to travel, he thought enviously; then frowned. There was something self-deceiving about such thoughts. He could be on an ocean going liner now, if he chose. Nobody was forcing him to do anything.

The stewardess came back with a silver bucket and poured him a glass of the sparkling wine. He lit a cigarette and wondered about his own motives. He had caught the New York flight without a moment's hesitation. A few hours earlier he had been, in his own mind at least, out of the espionage business for good. What had changed his mind? Loyalty to Palmer? To MAC's? The sheer fascination of the problem in detection with which he was faced?

Perhaps it was simply the thought of winning. He had never fully resigned himself to the total defeat inflicted by Clayton and by the apartment murderers. It went against his nature to lose. The merest whiff of possible recovery had been sufficient to send him chasing the sun westwards.

He felt a sudden stab of guilt: he should have telephoned

Anne. He must remember to send a telegram from the airport.

The stewardess refilled his tulip glass. He looked at her face, and she smiled. Piers smiled back happily, showing his teeth.

At one thirty a.m. Piers sat in a hotel room and asked the switchboard for a Warwickshire number. It was the second time in a few days that he had phoned Don Kendell at dawn. While he was waiting he sipped whisky. He was drinking quite heavily again; the liquor seemed to have no effect.

There was a click, and he heard the British ringing tone. After a moment, a familiar voice said: 'Hello?'

'Don, it's Piers Roper.'

'Piers! Uh . . .' The young executive was wary. He wanted nothing to do with losers.

'I'm ringing from New York. Don, I realise that from your end it looks as if the battle is over. But the thing is bigger than you know. I want a favour.'

'Well, you can try me.' Kendell would hedge his bets if he thought he could do so without risk.

'It's simple. I need a quick introduction to someone on a New York newspaper so that I can go through their back numbers.'

'There was a pause while the other man thought. 'I think I can do that, Piers. Are you going to tell me what it's all about?'

'As soon as I know myself. Will you ring me back?'

'Give me twenty minutes.'

'Thank you. Goodbye.'

Piers began to undress. He thought about food, and decided he could wait until morning. He had no unpacking to do – his case, borrowed from Palmer, contained only the razor and two shirts he had bought on the way to Heathrow, and some sleeping pills.

He was sitting up in bed, smoking, when the phone rang again.

'Piers, I must make this quick because I have to leave. A pal of mine is a news editor in Fleet Street. His New York

man is night editor of the *Daily News*; a chap called Callaghan. My pal has given your name to Callaghan, who has told the *Daily News* librarian to expect you.'

'Don, I'm grateful.'

'Don't mention it. And I mean, don't mention it to anyone.'

'I understand. Goodbye.'

Piers took two sleeping pills with the last of his whisky, and turned out the light.

The newspaper's library had a small file of cuttings on Milton Kane. He had once stood for election to a county Republican committee in New Jersey. He had made a controversial speech about nudity in advertising. His two divorces had been reported in the society columns. There was a photograph of him: a tall man, quite elegant, with sideburns and a rapidly receding hairline, giving evidence to a Congressional committee on the motor industry.

But it was a yellowing clipping from the business page that interested Piers most.

Kane had not always worked for MAC's. He had briefly been a partner in the advertising agency of Ascher & Kane. He had found Madison Avenue uncongenial, and the company had got into serious trouble. It had been rescued by a big loan, and sold a little later.

The clipping simply said that Ascher & Kane, which was again on a solid financial footing, had been taken over by a major ad agency.

But it was the loan which provided another piece of the jigsaw for Piers.

The lender had been the New Bank of Chicago.

He looked for a phone as he walked away from the newspaper office. He had to call George Hartmann, the stockbroker Palmer knew, for a lunch appointment.

He spotted a kiosk and crossed the road at a corner. A young man with long hair beat him to the phone. He decided to wait.

He had Milton Kane nailed to the wall now. Presumably

the man had been unable to repay his loan to the bank. Someone there was covering up for him, and using the fact as a lever to force Kane to give away company secrets.

Piers looked through the glass and realised the young man was not using the telephone. He frowned with irritation. He was about to open the door and ask him to leave when he looked again.

The man was stirring something in a paper cup. After a moment he poured the liquid from the cup into a syringe. Next he wound a leather strap around his forearm and rubbed it up and down vigorously, stopping now and again to examine the inside of his wrist.

He wore soiled jeans, open sandals without socks, and some kind of raincoat. His full beard and moustache were unkempt. Intent on what he was doing, he appeared not to notice Piers staring at him.

Apparently satisfied with his work, he picked up the syringe and carefully stuck its needle into his arm. He closed his eyes, slid his head back against the glass of the booth, and depressed the plunger. Piers heard a muffled cry: 'Hit me, baby, hit me!' Then the man collapsed on the floor in a crumpled heap.

Piers stared at the expression of contentment frozen on the junkie's face. Then he walked quickly away.

He pushed the memories out of his mind while he went into a bar, ordered whisky, and used the phone. George Hartmann was in. He spoke pleasantly, insisted that lunch was on him, and gave Piers the address of his club. It was not until he was sitting down with a drink in front of him and a cigarette in his hand that Piers let the past come flooding back.

Vietnam was not the same as Malaya, but you couldn't have told the Americans that in 1956. Major Roper looked across the table at the sweating, crew-cut Colonel from New Mexico and knew he was thinking: If the English can win a counter-insurgency war, by God we can. He was also feeling

resentment towards the pointy-headed Washington pen-pushers who thought he needed advice from the British, and forced him to sit and listen to a college boy with a plum in his mouth.

Piers, too, was feeling resentful. It must be the tenth time, he thought, that I have explained the principle of strategic hamlets to a condescending Yank who thinks his rank is too high for him to sit in a row of chairs and be lectured to.

He said: 'One of the differences which could affect this strategy is the fact that here you have borders with two other countries which you can't control. Guerrillas can slip across from Laos and Cambodia and slip back again.'

The CIA man spoke for the first time. He was young – younger than Roper – and rather intense. He took off his spectacles. 'The banditti over there won't make things easy for them.'

Piers frowned. This was something new. None of the other Americans he had spoken to in Saigon had given any sign of having thought about the people across the border. He said: 'Those people aren't political, unless I'm mistaken. All they're interested in is growing opium poppies.'

'Which gives us a lever,' the CIA man said. The Colonel was glaring daggers at him, but he had not noticed.

Piers decided to chase the point. 'If you find a way to cut off their opium exports, they will certainly shelter guerrillas.'

With the air of one who scores a debating point, the CIA man said: 'And if we do the opposite?'

Piers finished his whisky and ordered another. He could walk to Hartmann's club, but if he took a cab he would have time for another drink. He tapped his glass on the counter.

He had thought the young CIA man was shooting off his mouth, back there in Saigon. In those days the CIA was seen in the same sort of light as MI5. Now, people would believe anything disgraceful about the Agency.

Had the rot started that far back? Had somebody done a deal with the opium men? While they were starting a war that would make young people ashamed to be American,

did they also unleash the drugs that the children would turn to in their despair?

He looked at his watch. He had a few minutes more.

He remembered the episode which had made him think that the CIA man had let out a secret, and not merely a vain boast.

The airstrip was at the edge of the plain. A few miles away, where the ground began to climb towards the mountains, it would have been cooler.

Roper was touring the countryside in a jeep with Petro, an American officer of equal rank with himself. The theory was that Roper would teach Petro to see the land with jungle eyes. Piers thought it was a waste of time; but Petro was not unpleasant company.

The American was in the brick hut that served as an air terminal, checking in with his base by radio. Piers sat on the shady side of the jeep, drinking beer from a can, watching a small aircraft come in to land.

Petro came towards him across the concrete with a piece of paper in his hand. He sat down beside the vehicle and opened a beer can.

'There's a change of plan,' he said abruptly.

Piers crumpled a can in his fist and said nothing.

'We're taking on a passenger.' Petro looked at the piece of paper. 'Giuliano Antonio.' He smiled. 'With a name like that, he can't be bad.'

'Who is he?'

'A civilian. God knows what he's doing here.' He pointed to the plane taxiing towards the hut. 'He's on that.'

Piers was mystified. 'Where are we taking him?'

'To a rendezvous at the border.'

Piers stared; then nodded slowly.

A man emerged from the aircraft and walked across the runway. He wore a dark suit and a trilby; but he walked as if he were accustomed to the heat, with slow, economical movements. He did not have to screw up his eyes against the sun.

Petro stood up suddenly, looking hard at the man.

Piers shot him a quizzical glance.

Petro's tone was explanatory. 'He walks like a man of honour,' he said quietly.

Reliving the scenes seemed to clear the memory, like absolution cancelling sin. Piers reflected that it was significant how the USA conjured up wartime recollections: it said something about the state of the place. Then he forgot the past as he entered Hartmann's club.

The place was quiet, almost hushed. The walls were dark, the hair had a distinctive smell – clean but not disinfected – and flunkeys stood around the foyer with nothing to do but open doors and nod Hello. Piers' first impression was that it was an imitation of something in St. James's.

He changed his mind quite quickly, blaming his first reaction on xenophobia. For one thing, the place was genuinely old. The marble stairs were hollowed by several generations of boots; the woodwork had the patina of scores of new coats of paint; and the cloakroom door was heavy and carved.

He checked his coat, washed his hands, and gave a dollar to the man who held out a warm towel. He was going to like the place.

He went to the bar and asked for Hartmann. Instead of simply pointing the man out, the waiter led him across to the table. Hartmann stood up.

'Mr. Roper?'

'Mr. Hartmann.' They shook hands.

Hartmann was Jewish. Piers found himself paying more attention to genealogy in the USA, perhaps because the Americans themselves made so much fuss about it. But the stockbroker had the arched eyebrows, heavy features, and dark skin beloved of pre-war Fascist cartoonists.

'Palmer is the most useful Englishman I know,' he said when they had sat down again. 'There's nothing he can't find out.'

Piers smiled. 'It doesn't always look that way from my end of the operation.'

'If you're one of his young eagles, you must be pretty bright.'

Piers raised his eyebrows. Hartmann was probably sixty, but it was still flattering of him to call Piers young.

The waiter brought Piers' whisky, and he watered it. Then he asked Hartmann: 'What do you think of this business over MAC's?'

'I don't understand it, yet.' He sipped pale sherry.

'I wondered whether any more information might have come your way since you talked to Palmer.'

Hartmann shrugged. 'Maybe – it's hard to evaluate. I imagine you know more than I.'

Piers realised that the man was prepared to trade information, but not to give it away free. He thought for a moment. 'We believe there's a bear raid on.'

Hartmann's eyebrows arched even more. 'Palmer thinks this?'

'Yes.'

'It's very quiet, if it's there at all.'

'It wouldn't work otherwise, would it.'

The broker smiled, showing capped teeth. 'It's certainly a good time for a raid – after the strike, and the anti-trust suit.'

'That's not quite how we see it. We think the opportunities have been created, rather than simply seized.'

'Jesus. Palmer thinks this?' he repeated.

'Yes. Do you know who might be behind it?'

Hartmann shook his head slowly. 'I've done a little asking around, of course. Most of the buyers have been fairly predictable – pension funds, unit trusts, insurance companies. A couple of private buyers, and one curiosity – a company called Masteradio.' He spelt it. 'But no-one in the big league. However, I wasn't looking out for this kind of operator.'

A waiter brought menus. 'Would you like to order, gentlemen?'

Hartmann took one and opened it. 'I recommend the plaice – fish is good here,' he said. But he seemed abstracted.

Late that afternoon Piers found Masteradio in the Philadelphia phone book.

He rang them from his hotel room, and asked for the accounts department. A girl answered.

Piers flattened his vowels and tried not to sound English. 'Hello, this is Bridge Electronics, New York,' he said, pronouncing the name 'N'Yock'. 'We have a credit transfer from you in payment for wedge loops.' He had just invented wedge loops, but an accounts clerk would not know that. 'Trouble is, you've left out the name of the bank. Would you like to give me the details?'

The girl said: 'Lemme putchon hold, okay?'

Piers shrugged and waited.

She came back. 'New Bank of Chicago,' she said. 'It's printed on the forms. What kind of a payment note you got there anyway?'

Piers put the phone down slowly.

He liked Washington better than New York. It seemed more civilised. The air tasted sweeter, the architecture had more dignity, the people spoke less quickly.

The hamburger joints were much the same, though. Piers picked up his tray from the counter, crossed to a table, and sat down opposite the girl.

He had picked her out in the courtroom during the morning. She was overweight and had a bad complexion: it was likely that both were due to the food she ate in places like this. Her lime-green dress did not quite match her shoes, and both clashed with her pink cardigan. She looked to be in her late twenties – too young to be resigned to spinsterhood and too old to be choosy over men.

'May I sit here?' he asked her.

She spoke through a mouthful of cole slaw. 'Go right ahead.' Her attention returned to her plate.

Piers had bought a hamburger, remembering what Ratcliffe, the Parliamentary Under-secretary, had said about them. He took a bite and knew that he had been misled. He swallowed, pushed his plate aside, and tried the coffee. That was all right.

He looked up at the girl. 'Will you mind if I smoke?'

'Not at all.'

He kept his gaze on her as he lit up. She began to realise he was watching her. He said: 'Weren't you in court this morning? The anti-trust suit brought by MAC's?'

She seemed more interested in her food than in him. 'Right,' she said. 'I didn't see you.'

'I'm looking in on it for my studies. I have an English law degree, but I want to practise here. Anti-trust legislation is one of the things that's different here.'

She finished her food. He offered her a cigarette, and she accepted. Now she looked at him with curiosity. She said: 'I'm just an assistant to one of the attorneys. Isn't it boring?'

'I find it fascinating. Still, everybody has different tastes.'

'Sure.'

'What does interest you?'

She realised at last that he was trying to pick her up. A kind of amazement showed in her eyes, as if this was something she had long ago given up hoping for. 'The movies,' she said. 'I like to go to the movies.'

She was certainly not Piers' kind of girl. He said: 'Listen, I wouldn't want you to think I'm being fresh, or anything, but . . . would you come to the movies with me?'

'Why not?' Her gaze was speculative. 'So long as you don't want to meet me inside.'

'Certainly not.'

'Some students do, y'know.'

'Shall I pick you up at home?'

'What kind of car you got?'

'New Chev.' He could hire one by tonight, anyway.

'Nice. Okay, I'll give you my address.' She took a pen from her bag and scribbled on a paper serviette.

'Let me walk you back to the court,' Piers said.

They got up. The girl looked at his plate. 'You don't eat much.'

He ushered her out of the café. 'I don't like American food,' he said.

She laughed. 'That's crazy!' She thought for a moment. 'You know something? I never went out with a foreigner before.'

He smiled at her. God, she was ghastly. 'Sometimes I have trouble following people's accents. Like this morning, that Parkson fellow - I couldn't understand him. I wanted to know the name of the people who financed the merger, but I couldn't catch it. Maybe it'll be in the newspapers tomorrow'.

'No, they don't report it,' she said. 'Only at the beginning and the end.' She took out a packet of gum, offered him a stick, and stuffed one into her mouth. 'I could find out for you.'

'Could you really?'

'Sure, I get to see all the papers.'

'That'd be terrific, because I have to go to class this afternoon.'

'I'll let you know tonight.'

'Thanks. What film would you like to see?'

'I don't know. Something romantic.'

Piers pulled up at the kerb and killed the engine. 'It's been a super evening,' he said. 'Thank you.'

'Well, thank you,' the girl said. 'For the chocolates, and the meal, and everything.'

'Wasn't the film good?' Piers said. It had been awful.

'Gorgeous.'

'Oh - by the way, did you remember to get that name?'

'Jeez, I almost forgot.' She rummaged in her handbag and brought out an envelope. 'I wrote it down.'

He slipped it into his pocket. 'Thanks. Well, I hope I'll see you in court tomorrow.'

She laughed loudly. 'That's good! I'll see you in court - get it?'

He smiled.

'Well, goodnight,' she said. She looked up at the building. 'Back to my room.'

'Good night, then.'

'You know something, Piers? You're a real English gentleman.' She leaned over, kissed his cheek, and got out of the car. 'Goodbye!'

Piers waved, and pulled away quickly. 'A real English

gentleman,' he said to himself. He took out the envelope and tore it open. As he stopped for traffic lights he read the sheet of paper inside.

It said: 'New Bank of Chicago.'

Philadelphia was worse than New York – worse than Detroit, even. It reminded Piers of Liverpool. He was worried, which made it worse.

Every day MAC's shares sunk lower. Soon someone would point out that this was more than ordinary fluctuation. The newspapers would run summaries of the company's misfortunes, and the downward drift would turn into an avalanche. Then there would be no remedy.

Every line of inquiry Piers followed brought him around in a circle to the bank. Yet they could not be the prime movers. Banks weren't in the car business. They might buy shares, and they might even – in the USA at least – manipulate share prices. But takeovers were things they organised for other people.

He looked out of the cab window at the city going by. A few days ago he had seemed to be so near to figuring the whole thing out. Now it was slipping out of his grasp again. He had to break out of the circle.

'This is it, buddy,' the driver said.

Piers paid him and got out. The car pulled away. Piers turned to look at the factory.

The shock was almost physical. The blood seemed to pound in his ears, and dark circles closed around his eyes, as if he were looking down a long tunnel.

He shook his head to clear it. The answer was obvious – it should have been his first guess. It explained so much, and it was written in front of him in letters two feet high.

The signboard outside the factory read:

MASTERADIO
A Part of the Greatlake Organisation

Exhaustion was catching up with Piers. It was not work that tired him. But the flying, the Identikit air terminals, the anonymous hotel rooms, and the bad food all conspired to sap his strength.

He checked into yet another hotel in Philadelphia. His room depressed him as he looked around: the twin beds, the inevitable colour television, the plastic chair which looked as if it had been die-stamped – the place had no character, no identity. Such hotels were like Coca-Cola: the same anywhere from Birmingham to Singapore.

He ordered a bottle of scotch from room service, and gave the telephonist Palmer's London number. Then he kicked off his shoes and lay on the bed.

He felt no elation at having solved the mystery. No flash of genius had given him the answer: just persistent following-up of leads. He ought to have guessed it – the Clayton episode should have been enough.

The waiter brought his whisky. Piers tipped him and poured himself a drink. The phone sang softly.

'Roper.'

'Palmer.'

'I've cracked it, Henry.'

'Good boy. Who?'

'Greatlake.'

'Aaaah.' Palmer gave a long sigh of satisfaction. 'Go on.'

'George Hartmann set me on the right track. He knew that a small company called Masteradio had been buying MAC's shares. It turns out that Masteradio is a Greatlake subsidiary. It's as simple as that.'

'Paint the full picture for me, Piers.'

'Greatlake and the New Bank of Chicago are in the thing together. Milton Kane is heavily in debt with the bank, which explains how they got him to leak secrets. The bank also financed the merger between those two components suppliers which caused so much trouble. The object was, as we guessed, to bring down the price of the shares. Greatlake are buying them through Masteradio. Incidentally, Masteradio bank with the New Bank of Chicago.'

'Now we can understand the Clayton business. What happened was this. I reported to you that there was a leak in MAC's and you passed the information on to MAC's. Naturally, Milton Kane got to know that we knew there was a leak. He reported our discovery to his contact man at Greatlake. So Greatlake wanted to know who, in their own organisation, had smelled a rat.'

'So they put a spy into their own company.'

'Clayton.'

'Right. Clearly, either Clayton or somebody in the USA realised that I was MAC's man in Greatlake (UK). Clayton was then instructed to get rid of me. He probably had Shipley's help, in fact – especially if Shipley was in on the bear raid.'

'I see. Piers, if we're right in thinking that these people were responsible for causing the strike and arranging the murder in your apartment, *what kind of people are they?*'

'I don't know. Perhaps we are naive to think that American business is as ethical as the English variety.'

'Maybe.' There was a pause. 'And we still don't know exactly how you were found out.'

'These things are incidental. What do we do now?'

'I think it's time for you to go to the MAC's president. His name is Sarjeant.' Palmer spelt it. 'Where are you now?'

'Philadelphia.'

'Fly back to New York. I'll make some calls while you're

on your way. When you arrive, there will be a message at the airport telling you where to meet Sarjeant. I'll make sure he knows who you are.'

'Right.'

'You sound tired, Piers.'

'I'll be glad when this operation is wrapped up.'

'We're almost there.'

'Sure. Goodbye, Henry.'

'Take care.'

Piers jiggled the receiver until the receptionist came back on. Then he said: 'I'm checking out. Would you prepare my bill?'

He swallowed his drink and put the whisky bottle in his suitcase.

The limousine swung off the road and through the gateway, and purred quietly up the long drive. It was a version of MAC's biggest saloon, stretched in midsection to take an extra row of seats. With its chauffeur, it had been waiting for Piers at the airport. It belonged to Paul John Sarjeant, the president of the Midwest Automobile Company.

The drive out of the city to Sarjeant's semi-country home had been Piers' first taste of civilised living for a long time. The air-conditioned car was superbly comfortable, and the chauffeur had made sure Piers knew where the cocktail bar was. He felt somewhat restored.

He looked through the car window. Sarjeant's house was very gracious, too. It was a low, wide bungalow, about fifty years old yet architecturally modern. It might have been designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

The car stopped with a crunch of fat tyres on gravel. Piers got out. The door of the house was opened and a beautiful woman aged about fifty years came out.

'You must be Mr. Roper,' she said. 'Welcome. I'm Paula Sarjeant.'

Piers shook her outstretched hand. 'How do you do.'

She led him into the house and showed him to a bathroom. 'I'm sure you feel terrible after such a long journey. Why don't you freshen up while I tell my husband you're here.'

'Thank you.' Piers went into the bathroom and washed his hands and face.

When he came back into the hall, a black woman in an apron was waiting. She said: 'Would you come this way, please? Mr. Sarjeant is in the den.' Piers followed her.

Sarjeant's 'den' was as big as the drawing-room in Piers' London flat. A small family could have lived there. It had a desk and bookshelves on one side; a sofa, portable colour TV and teak-faced refrigerator on the other; and a cycling machine and some dumb-bells at the far end.

Sarjeant stood up behind the desk. 'Mr. Roper. I'm not sure who you are or why you want to see me, but you come with extremely high references. Sit down. Can I fix you a drink?'

'A small whisky.' Piers sat down on the sofa.

Sarjeant pulled away a section of bookcase to reveal a small collection of bottles. He selected one. 'Water?'

Piers looked at the bottle. 'Is that a single malt?'

'Yes.'

'No water, thank you.'

Sarjeant brought two glasses over and pulled out a chair to sit facing Piers.

Piers said: 'You employ me. Until a few days ago I was also employed by Greatlake, as Managing Director of the UK subsidiary.'

Sarjeant frowned and put his glass down. 'Mr. Roper, I'm beginning to think my chief executive was wrong to tell me I should talk to you.' He scratched his silver-grey head uneasily. 'Still, I suppose it's too late for caution now. You're here, so you'd better tell me what you've come to say.'

Piers sipped the neat spirit. It was very old. It started a fire in his abdomen. He said: 'When MAC's bought out the English Motor Corporation, you took out a contract with my employer for information about Greatlake (UK). I got a job with Greatlake in order to get that information for you.'

'Several months ago I discovered Greatlake was getting some very hot information from MAC's. I traced the leak back, through a personnel bureau in London and a bank in New York, to an executive of yours called Milton Kane.'

Sarjeant started, and spilled a little whisky. 'Milt! Good

God, he was here to dinner a week ago – are you sure it's him?"

Piers nodded. 'The banker who is running the information pipeline has Kane's number in his book. Furthermore, Kane is in debt with the bank.'

'Poor Milt.' Sarjeant shook his head sadly. 'I wonder what drove him to it.'

'That is not all,' Piers continued. 'The same bank financed the merger between the two components suppliers which caused you so much trouble.'

'Yeah?' Sarjeant seemed to be losing interest. Piers had seen the reaction before, when he had told men that one of their closest colleagues was a traitor. They seemed to retreat from the business consequences of the revelation, mesmerised by the personal blow of betrayal.

'Mr. Sarjeant, that same bank has a client called Masteradio. That company is a subsidiary of Greatlake, and it has been buying MAC's shares as they fall. Don't you see? You're being raided. Greatlake want your company.'

Sarjeant looked at him strangely. 'Well, we knew that, of course.'

Piers was stunned. 'What?'

'We knew.' Sarjeant gave an incredulous laugh. 'Haven't you watched the news today?' He stood up, took a video cassette from his desk, and plugged it into the television set. 'I always have them tape the news at seven, because I don't get home in time for it.' The screen flickered into life.

The news programme began with a shot of the outside of MAC's biggest plant, in Detroit. A voice-over said: 'The Union of Auto Workers today called a strike at every factory of the Midwest Automobile Corporation. Assembly lines ground to a halt as pickets intercepted workers on their way to the morning shift.'

The newsreader's head replaced the exterior shot. 'MAC's shares, already weakening on Wall Street, took a ninety-cent tumble at the news.'

The view switched again, this time to the New York headquarters of Greatlake. 'But the day's most dramatic development came a few hours ago when Greatlake Motors announced a takeover bid for MAC's. The bid, if successful,

would reduce the number of major American motor manufacturers from four to three.'

The newsreader came back. 'MAC's would not comment except to say that the bid would have to go before the Securities Exchange Commission. We'll have a full report and analysis of the day's events later in the programme.

'We'll also be talking to three of the four ex-members of the Beatles, here in New York for – ' Sarjeant switched off the set.

Piers sat back, deflated. 'They beat me,' he said.

'That's about how I feel,' Sarjeant replied.

'Pardon me. I've no right to be feeling sorry for myself.'

Sarjeant sat down heavily. 'It's okay.'

'Is there anything in this business about the SEC?'

'I doubt it.' The older man closed his eyes. 'They're empowered to prevent the formation of monopolies; but when the alternative is for one of the country's major employers to go bankrupt, what can they do? They may force Great-lake to hive off one of our divisions – trucks, probably – as a token.' He stood up abruptly. 'No, the only thing that can save us now is a loan of about a billion dollars; and that's what I should be worrying about. We won't get it, but I have to try.' He pushed a bell on his desk. 'I'll have you driven back to the city.'

The coloured woman appeared. Sarjeant shook hands with Roper again.

'Thank you for your efforts,' he said.

Piers nodded. 'I'm just sorry it was all too late.'

Soon he could stop travelling. Piers looked forward to returning home, as the limousine wound its way through the New York traffic towards his hotel. He would not go back immediately. He could do with a day of rest before the trans-atlantic flight.

He could go back by ship, even. He smiled to himself as the car drew to a halt. Somehow ships weren't his style.

He thanked the chauffeur and got out. He wondered whether to try to get hold of Louise tonight. He felt the need of companionship. And seeing her might help him sort out

his feelings about Anne before he went back.

He entered the hotel lobby. A voice said: 'Mr. Tabor?'

Piers' heart seemed to stop.

There was a deep coldness in the pit of his stomach as he turned around. The man was young, with thick dark hair and a moustache. He wore a neat suit. His collar was undone and his tie was loosened; and his jacket was open, allowing the dull gleam of metal to peep around the lapel. The man carried a gun.

Adrenalin tautened Piers's reflexes. His arms hung loose at his side, and he stood on the balls of his feet, calves tensed to spring. The young man saw the signs, and puzzlement showed behind his eyes.

'It's okay,' he said. 'I'm a cop.'

Piers's muscles relaxed, but his heart beat faster. 'What is it?' he said.

'I have to ask you some questions about the murder of a man called James Wyatt. Please come with me to the precinct house.'

The homicide Lieutenant's office was the size of a small bathroom. A big desk, two chairs and a green metal filing cabinet filled it. It had no windows.

The Lieutenant sat on one side of the desk, Piers sat on the other, and the young detective who had picked him up leaned in the doorway. The Lieutenant had a pale, lined face and balding head. He wore a waistcoat and an empty shoulder holster, and his shirtsleeves were rolled.

'It took me a long time to find you, Mr. Tabor,' he said. He spoke with what Piers by now recognised as a New York accent. 'You know something? Your description was circulated to every hotel in New York City. Response? Zero. We thought you left the country. Then, a week later, a bell captain rings in and says he thinks he's got you. We shoot over to the hotel, and you're gone. Three days later, he calls again. You've phoned ahead to say you're coming back. My boy goes over to pick you up, and you walk in as cool as ice. Where have you been?'

Piers spoke slowly. He wanted to say as little as possible.

They were calling him Mr. Tabor -- so how much did they know? He said: 'I went to London, came back, went to Washington and Philadelphia, and came back.'

'It doesn't look like the behaviour of a guilty man.'

'It wasn't.'

'You want some coffee?'

'I'd love some. Black, no sugar.'

The Lieutenant looked at the young detective. 'Me too, Larsen.' The man disappeared.

Piers said: 'What would you like me to tell you?'

'Lemme put you in the picture, Mr. Tabor. A woman named Louise Coulson reported finding a body in your apartment.' Piers tried to conceal his shocked reaction. Louise! The Lieutenant went on: 'She was on her way to a date with you when she saw three men whom she considered suspicious characters leaving your apartment. She went down to the lobby and phoned us. When she went back to the apartment she found the body of a man named James Wyatt, 23, no known address, thought to be a male prostitute.'

She must have been phoning while I left, Piers thought. He said nothing.

The Lieutenant prompted him. 'Any comment, Mr. Tabor?'

Piers' eyes narrowed. 'So you sent my description to every hotel in the city. There was a lot of legwork involved in that exercise. New York has a lot of murders -- do you put that much effort into every one?'

The detective nodded approvingly. 'You catch on quick.' The coffee arrived, in paper cups. Piers lit a cigarette.

The Lieutenant resumed. 'First indications were that the man had been murdered during a homosexual orgy. The Coulson woman claimed she was sure you were heterosexual. We didn't take too much notice of that. We *did* take notice when she went through the criminal files and picked out a photograph of one of the men she saw leaving the flat.

'Here it is.' He tossed a print at Piers.

Piers looked at it. In his mind he heard the man yell: 'Bolognese!' He blanched.

'Mr. Tabor, I want that man. He is a known criminal,

suspected of three other homicides but convicted of none. His M.O. is to slit the throat almost to the point of decapitation. Not only do I want to put him somewhere far away from decent people: I want to nail the men who employ him.

'Think before you answer this question. Who might have wanted to frame you for murder?'

Piers drew raggedly on his cigarette. Louise had got him off the hook. There were still too many things he did not understand; but he knew what he had to do.

He said: 'I'm afraid I haven't the slightest idea.'

The Lieutenant's façade of detachment slipped for the first time. The muscles of his face bunched in anger. 'Mr. Tabor, you are lying to me.'

Piers remained impassive. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I can't help you.'

Something like despair came into the other man's eyes. He turned away. Out of the corner of his mouth he said: 'You can go now.'

Piers got up at seven a.m. after a sleepless night. He had taken three pills when he got back to the hotel at two thirty, but they had had no effect. He spent the whole night running pointlessly over his strategy for the day.

He bathed, shaved, and dressed; then spent an hour smoking and drinking coffee in the hotel restaurant. He could not eat. He wanted a drink, which was ridiculous.

He took a taxi to the building near Central Park where the inquiry agent in the mustard coloured suit had his office.

The place was too warm even this early in the morning. The receptionist was putting on her lipstick as Piers went in. A moment later another door opened, and the mustard suit came in carrying a paper cup full of coffee.

The man looked at Roper, then remembered the 1500 dollar advance he had given. He beamed.

'Come in, Mr. Tabor. I've been wondering when we'd see you.'

Piers followed him into the inner office and sat down in an over soft chair. The telephone on the desk was purple.

'Some coffee?'

Piers shook his head. 'What have you got for me?'

The inquiry agent gulped some coffee. He made a face. 'This stuff tastes awful.' He put the cup down. 'I think you're going to be pleased with what we've done. Let me get you the file.'

He pulled a painting away from the wall, spun a dial, and opened the safe. He sat down with the file in front of him.

'I imagine this is what you were looking for.' He handed a photograph to Piers.

It appeared to have been taken through a hotel window with a telephoto lens. It showed Paul Anthony and a blonde woman lying naked on a bed. She was smoking a cigarette.

Piers looked up. 'You bloody fool,' he said. 'I didn't hire you to take dirty pictures! I asked for 24-hour surveillance on this man - I wanted to know all about everyone he met or spoke to for two weeks.'

The private detective paled. 'We assumed it was a divorce case - but don't worry, Mr. Tabor, we followed your instructions to the letter. Here - look at it all.' He pushed the file across the desk.

Piers' anger subsided as he looked through the papers. They had prepared a complete dossier of the banker's movements. After the third day they had details of all the long-distance calls he made, and every call from his home. There were names of many of the people he met: everyone he had seen in his office, the guest list of a party he had been to, every caller to his home.

There were more photographs: Anthony making a call from a phone box, buying a newspaper in a street, getting into a taxi.

There was a report on his personal habits: he drank gin, favoured Italian restaurants, usually wore blue, used contraceptive sheaths, bought flowers for his wife.

Then there were more photographs. Piers looked at the second set carefully. Paul Anthony getting on a bus? Going into an amusement arcade? Lending his newspaper to a fat man...

Piers recognised the man. Again he visualised that face, twisted into a rictus of pleasure, screaming: 'Bolognese!'

Piers replaced the papers in the folder and closed it. 'You've done a good job,' he said. 'I want you to mail me a copy of everything in here and keep another copy for yourselves. I'll take these with me. Do I owe you anything?'

'Not unless you want the surveillance to continue.' The man looked relieved. 'In fact we may owe you a few bucks.'

'Mail it.' Piers got up.

The purple phone rang. The detective ignored it. 'I'll see you to the door.'

'No need. Answer your phone.'

'Well, I hope we can be of service to you again some time, Mr. Tabor.'

'Goodbye.' Piers closed the door, nodded at the receptionist, and went out.

He rang George Hartmann's office from a call box in the street.

'Piers! Do I owe you a thank you! Not one of my clients was holding MAC's stock yesterday when the shit hit the fan.'

'I've got another tip for you. Tell them to buy it again now.'

'Really? What do you know?'

'I can't tell you now. Listen, I want a favour. I need the name of the president of the New Bank of Chicago, and an address where I can catch him today.'

'Give me a few minutes, Piers.'

'I'll call you again.'

Piers hung up and left the kiosk. It was eleven o'clock. He walked the street until he found a bar, and went in.

He took ten minutes over his scotch, then rang Hartmann again.

'The old man is still president, but he doesn't do any work,' Hartmann said. Piers got the feeling that Hartmann did not approve of old men who held office but did no work. 'Name is William Anthony, but he likes to be called Bill.'

'Anthony? Is he the father of Paul Anthony?'

Hartmann gave the vocal equivalent of a shrug. 'Could be. I know he has sons. He spends his time growing tomatoes in greenhouses up at Cape Cod.'

'Address?'

'Do you realise how difficult it is to get hold of information like this?'

Piers laughed. 'Give, George, give.'

Hartmann read out the address. He said: 'Did you mean that about buying MAC's?'

'I did. Thank you, George.'

'Thank you, m'boy, thank you.'

A high wall topped with barbed wire surrounded the house and its grounds. Piers stopped the hired car in front of a pair of heavy gates. The sun had dimmed to red, and he smelled the sea as he wound down the window. A contraption oddly like a parking meter barked at him: 'Who is it?'

It was a two-way intercom with a closed-circuit television camera mounted above it. There was a lot of security for a retired broker who did nothing but grow tomatoes. Piers spoke to the thing. 'My name is Piers Roper. I want to see Bill Anthony. The police have been asking me questions about Paul Anthony.'

He wondered again whether the two men were father and son. It would make things a lot easier if they were.

The heavy gates opened silently, and Piers took it for an invitation. He drove up to the house in the darkening evening.

The man who came to the door was thickset, with glossy black hair brushed back, and a dark blue suit. He looked warily at the thick folder Piers carried under his arm.

He held the door then, without speaking, led him across the high-ceilinged hall into a room equipped like an office.

He did not sit down. 'I'm Mr. Anthony's secretary,' he said. 'What's this about his son?'

Piers resented the man's presumption. 'I think I'd prefer to tell it to Mr. Anthony himself.'

'Be reasonable, Mr. Roper. He's an old man - he rarely sees anyone. I'm a friend of the family and a full-time, living-in personal secretary. You have to go through me.'

'All right.' Piers opened the folder and took out the photo of Paul Anthony with the man who had said 'Bolognese!'

'Look at this. It shows Mr. Anthony, junior, associating with

a known criminal who is wanted by the police in connection with four murders.'

The secretary took the print and switched on a lamp beside his desk. He sat down and studied the picture. Piers lit a cigarette.

'Do the police have this picture?'

'Not yet.'

He looked up at Piers. 'Okay, how much do you want?'

'I'm not in the blackmail business. I want to see Anthony.'

The secretary thought for a long moment. The desk light glinted bluey off his hair.

He got up and left the room.

Piers studied the room while he waited. It was the office of a careful, tidy-minded administrator; a man who executed decisions, rather than making them. There were trays marked 'In' and 'Out', a desk calendar and a digital clock, a safe and a filing cabinet. A framed print on the wall, the only decorative object in sight, had a forlorn air, as if it had been chosen by someone else and left there because nobody noticed it.

The secretary returned, without the picture, and said: 'He'll see you.'

They crossed the hall again, past the broad sweep of a marbled staircase.

The old man sat at the far end of a long dining table. The light above him threw his face into shadow.

The secretary said: 'This is the man.'

Anthony looked up from the photograph. There was a shocked silence as memory relays clicked in the minds of both men. Anthony was the first to recover.

'Well, well,' he said. 'Major Roper.'

'Piers's eyes widened in astonishment. 'Don Giuliano!'

Eleven

Petro insisted on calling the man Don Giuliano, although Piers would have thought the correct form of address was Signor Antonio. Petro spoke to him in Italian, and his tone seemed solicitous. Why the American officer had slipped into an attitude of subservience to the civilian was a mystery which neither of them chose to explain.

Don Giuliano replied to Petro in monosyllables, accepting respect as his natural right. He sat still for most of the journey in the jeep: his teak-coloured face blank, impassive, disinterested.

As the afternoon wore away and the jeep bumped and lurched up into the foothills, the air cooled, and Piers and Petro put on their jackets. The other man seemed impervious to the temperature.

Piers continued his lecture on jungle warfare, talking to Petro about the terrain, pointing out the kind of place guerrillas would use for ambush, the territory they would avoid, the spots they might camp in. He turned to the passenger occasionally, including him in the conversation out of courtesy. Giuliano followed his pointed finger and nodded from time to time.

Feeling encouraged by this marginal unfreezing, Piers turned to face the back seat and said: 'What do you do in Civy Street, Don Giuliano?'

Petro shot him a sharp look. Giuliano said: 'I make arrangements.'

Piers smiled thinly. 'I suppose that could be said of most of us.'

There was no reply. Petro's attitude showed that Piers had overstepped some boundary of etiquette. Thereafter he ignored the passenger.

Their destination was a cross in the middle of a blank space on the map. Petro had pencilled-in a line where, his superior officer claimed, there was a road. If that piece of information came from the banditti, Piers thought, the 'road' could be anything from a dirt track to a strip of trampled vegetation.

In the event it was the latter. The mud road, rutted but negotiable, ran out just the other side of the last village. The three men got out of the jeep and began to walk. The path ran up a thickly-wooded hill. Piers felt nervous, and unbuttoned the flap of his holster. Giuliano caught the gesture, and his eyes twinkled briefly. He appeared to be unarmed.

The banditti appeared from nowhere. There were nine or ten of them, all carrying rifles. Their features were coarser than those of the Vietnamese peasants, and their clothing seemed more substantial. Piers had been expecting the usual pyjamas. They were on foot, but he imagined they had horses – or, more probably, donkeys – nearby.

The two soldiers stopped and Giuliano walked forward. He seemed to know instinctively how to behave.

One of the banditti spoke in fractured French-accented English. 'You are the emissary.'

Giuliano gave a small bow. Then he turned to Petro and Piers. 'I thank you for escorting me,' he said. It was clearly a dismissal. He turned back, and walked further along the trail. The banditti surrounded him.

It made a curious picture: the dark-suited man in a trilby, walking away into the jungle surrounded by armed peasants.

Piers did not see him again.

Age had been unkind to Giuliano Antonio, who now called himself William Anthony. His hair was white and sparse, the deep brown of his skin had paled, and his face sagged, as

if someone had let the air out. All that remained were the deep, small eyes with their look of detachment, dignity, and secret amusement.

He said: 'It must be twenty years. Yes.' The Italian accent had softened. 'It makes me sad that you should come to me with this' – he tossed the photograph aside with a gesture of contempt – 'when we were once comrades-in-arms.'

Piers sat down uninvited. There was so much to absorb, so many things explained by the appearance of this man in the scenario. He said: 'I was never your comrade. I had no part in what you were doing. I was used.'

The eyes narrowed. 'What, then, was I doing, Major Roper?'

'You were doing a deal with the opium growers in the Indo-chinese heartland. The American government needed the help of the *banditti*. In exchange they offered to protect the opium trade route. They probably thought they were only causing trouble for India, and perhaps Europe.'

'But you saw further ahead. When you had set the deal up, you moved – from Sicily to America. You expanded the market for your goods, had them refined down to heroin in France and shipped the stuff here. You found new sources of the raw material, in the Middle East. You grew rich.'

'Your . . . Family . . . was already running prostitution, illegal gambling and loan-sharking. You had the administrative machinery, the corrupt contacts, the personnel. Heroin was just another business enterprise.'

'It wasn't enough for you. You had been – what did Petro call it? – a man of honour. In America you were just a crook. But you wanted your sons to be bankers, not hoodlums.'

'You moved into big business – but you took your methods with you. You blackmail men like Milton Kane into giving away secrets. You corrupt trade unions so that you can call strikes at will. You commit murder at the drop of a hat, just to discredit me because I threatened your big project. You are the Mafia, and the stigma of that name will be on your descendants for generations.'

Giuliano's expression remained unchanged, but the skin around his eyes darkened with anger. He said: 'What price

do you ask for this photograph, Major Roper?’

‘A billion dollars.’

‘You are foolish.’

‘Not a payment: a loan. To be repayed at normal rates of interest. And not a loan to me, but to MAC’s.’

Giuliano looked at him curiously. ‘You risked your life coming here. You knew it. Yet all you ask is the loan which will save MAC’s from takeover by Greatlake.’

‘It’s a little more than that. You might say I want to save American capitalism from takeover by organised crime.’

Giuliano looked up at the secretary, who stood silently by the door. ‘Get the phone.’ He looked back at the photograph, then at Piers. ‘My son is dear to me. He is not the kind of young man I was: he does foolish things, like paying-off this soldier in person instead of having someone do it. He may not be the best of bankers, Major Roper, but he is a very poor hoodlum.’

The secretary came back and plugged the phone in to a wall socket. Giuliano said: ‘Get Paul John Sarjeant.’

They waited in silence. The secretary had to ring two numbers to discover Sarjeant’s number. Eventually he handed the phone to the old man.

‘Mr. Sarjeant? This is Bill Anthony. I hear you’re looking for a loan.’ There was a pause. ‘The New Bank of Chicago is right, and I do know that the figure is a billion. A young man named Roper has just persuaded me that it would be a good investment . . . of course. Will you have your people ring the bank in the morning? I’ll make sure the call is expected. Fine. Goodnight.’

Piers passed his hand over his eyes. He could not believe that it had been so easy in the end. Palmer had been the one to ask the crucial question, as usual. He had kept saying: ‘Who are these people?’ Once again, Piers had the feeling that he should have been able to work it out early in the game. There had been hints: the pronunciation of ‘Bolognese’, and Paul Anthony’s feeble attempt to hide his Italian ancestry under a Southern ‘Y’hear’.

The phone was taken away. Piers said: ‘I’ll get the photographs to you tomorrow.’

‘I trust you to destroy them, Major Roper.’

Piers frowned.

Giuliano added: 'I believe you, too, are a man of honour. You and I are more alike than you wish to believe. You made a pretty pompous English speech back there. Now, I guess it had a purpose, like most of the things you say. But some of that righteous indignation rang true.

'And yet, what is your role? You spit upon the name of my Family – yet you took me to the border to meet the *banditti*. You might have refused: got off the jeep and walked home. You could have killed me. If you had told the newspapers about my trip, the deal might never have come off.

'And now you come to me with this proposition, to which I have agreed. You have evidence which could be used to convict my son of conspiracy to murder. You have concealed this from the police for your own business purposes. For a second time, you permit a crime by remaining silent. You talk of my sons: what do you pass on to yours?'

Piers stood up. 'I have no sons,' he said quietly.

Victory had a bitter flavour. Winning always has its price: in time which might have been spent otherwise; in effort which might have gone towards something really worthwhile; and in dignity and self-respect. Piers sat at the airport bar and drank whisky, as if he could wash the taste out of his mouth. He gazed into the fluid in the glass: now that the operation was over, he had to cut down on his drinking.

He was suffering from anticlimax. He had driven back to New York from the coast, snatched a few hours' restless sleep, and driven to the airport first thing in the morning. There had been some messages for him at the hotel: from Sarjeant, from Palmer, and from Louise. He had ignored them all. The thing was done now; he was out of the fight; he had won.

'Can I have a drink?'

Piers looked up, startled by the voice. His heart jumped at the pretty, oval face and dark hair. But his voice was flat and cold. 'Louise.'

'I left a message at your hotel.'

'I know, Barman!'

'Just a coke. Piers?'

'Well?'

'So you know.'

'That you were working for Milton Kane? Yes, I know. I figured it out.'

She remained cool, elegant, detached. 'Tell me how,' she said, as if they were discussing the solution to a crossword puzzle.

'It was fairly obvious, like most of the things I failed to understand. I must have built up a psychological block to stop myself making the deduction. I trusted you. I took you to the apartment. You were the only person who knew about that place, yet did not know that I had taken it under a false name. Therefore you were the person who informed the opposition that I could be got at there.'

Her hand trembled a little as she raised her glass to her lips. She said: 'I didn't know what they were going to do. I didn't know who they were. All I was supposed to do was keep an eye on you, and report anything unusual. Naturally I reported the flat - you had told nobody about it, it was obviously secret.'

Piers nodded. 'It was suspicious enough for them to discuss me as a possible spy. When they did, someone produced a photograph of me, and Paul Anthony recognised me as the man who had visited him at his office. It was all they needed by way of confirmation.'

She looked at him, and he saw the hint of tears. 'When I saw those . . . *gangsters* . . . coming out of your apartment, I knew I had done the wrong thing. I called the police.'

'Yes. Your story protected me from the police. When they told you my name was Mark Tabor, you didn't correct them. I have that to thank you for, although I wouldn't have needed your help if you hadn't betrayed me in the first place.'

Anger flashed through the brimming tears. 'God damn, you were spying on me, too.'

Piers laughed ruefully. 'Yes, we were doomed to betray each other from the start.'

His flight was called. He stood up.

She said: 'Is that all you can say?'

He picked up his glass. 'What else is there? Do you want an aphorism? How about: "Spies should never fall in l-love, especially with each other." Damn.' His involuntary stammer disconcerted him. He threw back the rest of the whisky quickly, and banged the glass down on the bar. He could not bear to lose his self-possession. He looked at her face, and saw the hurt there. His own facade cracked. He turned and walked quickly away.

Palmer met him at Heathrow. He was quiet, but his elation showed in his vigorous handshake and the sparkle in the eyes behind the rimless glasses. 'I've had Sarjeant on the phone to me,' he said. 'A magnificent performance, Piers. A great coup.'

'It's what you pay me for.'

Palmer took his arm. 'Ah, a case of post-natal depression. It'll pass. Come on, I've got the car.'

They walked out to the car park and got into Palmer's Rover. 'Where to - Belgravia? Or would you like a drink at my place?'

'I'm on the wagon from today. I've been drinking too much. And you'd better take me to King's Cross - I want to get back to the cottage tonight.'

The car pulled away. 'Come on, then,' Palmer said. 'How did you pull it off?'

'The man who organised the murder was the son of the bank's president. I got some evidence implicating him, then blackmailed the bank into lending MAC's enough to fight the takeover.'

'Splendid. Piers, your reputation is made for life.'

Piers frowned. 'On the contrary, I am now utterly useless to you. My cover's been blown wide open.'

'Useless as an agent, perhaps.' Palmer paused to negotiate a roundabout. 'But then, you're a little tired of being an agent anyway.'

'I've resigned,' Piers said. 'I came back to finish the job because of a moral obligation to you and to MAC's. But I'm out.'

'I know how you feel. I'm tired, too, Piers. That's why I want you to have my job.'

'Oh!' Piers had not expected that. He thumbed the dashboard lighter and took out cigarettes.

Palmer went on: 'You can buy me out if you like, or just come in as chief executive. Or a combination: take part of your salary in equity.'

Piers blew out smoke. 'I'm sorry, Henry. I've come to dislike the business of espionage. I no longer want to be involved in anything which forces me to do A when I really want to do B. I want to live a normal life, without secrets. I want to marry a wife, and share my whole existence with someone else.'

'Damn it, Piers, I want you to run the business. Total control! You've always thought you could do it better than I – don't protest, I know you have – and I'm offering you the chance. And you can't live without money, wife or no wife.'

'I can live without great wealth. Look at me, Henry: fifty cigarettes a day, a bottle of whisky every night, I can't sleep, and I can't tell a woman I love her without b-bloody stammering.'

Palmer laughed; then sobered quickly. 'You say these things after every assignment. All right, maybe you mean them this time: neither of us can tell.'

They were both silent for a while. Piers opened the quarter-light and threw away his cigarette. The functional architecture of the railway station loomed in front.

Piers said: 'I'm determined, Henry.'

Palmer stopped the car. 'Ring me in a couple of days. You may change your mind.'

The cottage was dark and cold. Anne must have gone somewhere for the evening. Piers went around switching things on. It was quite late; she would be back soon.

He took off his shoes and sat down. The radio was within arm's reach. He turned it on and found a classical music station. He was nervously exhausted, but his mind was alert, hyperactive. He ran over the operation in his mind, putting the whole thing in neat order, labelling his mistakes,

tying up the ends and filing it away in his memory.

Time would ease his jittery nerves. He had been through things which would have distressed a younger man: sack-ing, blackmail, murder . . . Anne would help him forget. He could always sleep when he slept with her.

The symphony ended, and a Professor of English Literature came on to talk about Auden in the intermission. Poetry was not among Piers' enthusiasms. He turned the volume down. Intermissions were for alcohol. He went to the cabinet, got out the whisky, and poured a shot. Then he remembered his resolution, and left the glass on the shelf.

For the first time he noticed the telegram on the table. He picked it up and looked at it. It was the one he had sent Anne when he arrived in New York. It said: MUST FINISH WHAT I STARTED STOP BACK SOON STOP I AM SORRY STOP LOVE PIERS.

Underneath, in feminine handwriting, was written: 'I'm sorry too. Goodbye, Anne.'

He read it several times. He strode into the bedroom — her case was gone.

He began to tremble, and gripped the handle of the door for support. Frustration, rage and self-pity welled up inside him. He fought them down fiercely.

He went back into the drawing-room and laid the telegram down on the smoked-glass coffee table. Carefully, he flicked his cigarette lighter to flame and touched the sheet of paper. He stared into the little fire as it turned to ash.

The black fragments lay in a small heap. He blew once, and they disappeared into the air.

He said aloud: 'Anne, I didn't mean it!'

The second half of the concert started on the radio. Piers switched it off.

He undressed in the bedroom, put on his pyjamas, and got the sleeping pills from the bathroom. In the drawing-room he looked at the telephone. No: he could phone Palmer in the morning.

He took four sleeping pills with the whisky he had poured earlier. He considered that he had earned a good night's sleep.

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